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*Dedicated to Prof. Jerrold Levinson on his 75th Birth Anniversary*

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Contemplating Music across Cultures and Contexts: Philosophical Perspectives  
Guest Editor: Jonathan L. Friedmann

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*Dedicated to Prof. Jerrold Levinson  
on his 75th Birth Anniversary*

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# The Work of Jerrold Levinson

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SAAM TRIVEDI

When thinking about Anglophone musical aesthetics or philosophy of music (which we will not try to distinguish between here), the work of three philosophers – Malcolm Budd, Jerrold Levinson, and the late Roger Scruton – stands out if you look at the period from the 1960s onwards. This is not so much because of the musical knowledge of this triumvirate; though such knowledge is of course necessary even if not sufficient to philosophise about music. Instead, this trio is distinguished by the *philosophical rigour* or acumen in their writings about music. What follows is an attempt to give the reader a very rough (though not comprehensive) sense of the work on music of Jerrold Levinson, whose 75th birth anniversary is being celebrated by this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*.

It will be best to look at some issues that Levinson has written about. Musical ontology is one topic that comes to mind readily. Levinson has argued that musical works (be they songs or symphonies or something else) are abstract entities, types, that are common to their (more or less correct and complete) performances. They are not Platonist pure sound structures that exist eternally and are discovered; instead, they are created by composers and musicians in musico-historical and broadly cultural contexts, thus respecting the widely shared intuition that artists create artworks. These contexts of creation individuate or distinguish musical works from each other so that two works may sound exactly alike and yet be different works because one is bold and original, say, while the other created much later does not have these properties. Additionally, the instrumentation or performance means of musical works is also integral to their identity.

Let us turn next to the topic of musical expressiveness. Here, Levinson has argued that when we hear passages and pieces of music as expressive of affective states (as sad, happy, tranquil, anguished, hopeful, etc.), this involves imagining an indefinite agent in the music, a musical persona, expressing itself through the music, its gestures, its development, and so on. The persona need not be imagined in very highly foregrounded ways.

Musical understanding is another subject that Levinson has written about. The traditional view, architectonicism, about understanding works of Western classical music (symphonies, sonatas, and such) is that one needs to bear in mind the overall large-scale form or structure of these works. As opposed to this, and inspired by the work of the 19th-century English psychologist Edmund Gurney, Levinson has argued that the ordinary listener's apprehension of such works is not so intellectualised and is instead more moment-to-moment, or concatenationist, consisting in following the work as it unfolds over time. Such musical understanding does not have to be very highly verbalisable, nor need it involve formal, musicological terms so long as one has the right skill of being able to follow the music.

It is surprising that no philosopher before Levinson tried to define music, for trying to elucidate the nature or concept of music as an answer to the question "What is music" is arguably the first philosophical issue about music one should seek to address; just as the question "What is art?" is perhaps the most basic question in philosophical aesthetics. Levinson attempted to fill the gap by being the first to try to define music, across boundaries and barriers of time, place, culture, style,

genre, tradition, and so on. Of course, one should engage critically with all of Levinson's output and question it, including this definition (in particular, what it has to say about Muzak or elevator music); and Levinson's definition of music has been questioned by those who came later and have sometimes offered their own definition instead. As Levinson would agree, philosophy, after all, questions everything, including the very nature, conceptions, aims, methods, etcetera of philosophy itself!

Space does not allow discussion of other topics within musical aesthetics that Levinson has written about, in addition to the issues mentioned briefly above. Among many others, these include jazz; song; musical evaluation; musical performance; critical interpretation; performative interpretation; truth in music; music and negative emotion; hope in music; musical profundity; authenticity in music; film music; musical chills; musical literacy; and so on. On these issues, and others besides, Levinson's work has been widely influential and has been discussed by philosophers in many different countries across the world.

Some of the features that set Levinson's work on music apart from many other philosophers of music, including some contemporary writers, are these. Levinson always has a broader sense of musical culture, music's history, music's instrumentation, and its practices. He is also keenly aware of related issues in philosophical aesthetics, which some authors neglect; for philosophy of music is a branch of philosophical aesthetics and so overlaps a lot with philosophical issues pertaining to the other arts. Levinson's work has philosophical rigour, as mentioned earlier, and he has a deep knowledge of music.

Let us celebrate Jerrold Levinson, then, and wish him a happy 75th birthday, with many more to come!

*Brooklyn College & CUNY Graduate Center, USA*

# Introduction

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JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN

In the preface to his 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut declares that all music is sacred (5). On the surface, this statement is overly roseate and indiscriminate. How can every piece of music—or, more precisely, every combination of sounds that might conceivably be called “music” no matter the type, quality, or intention—be hallowed? There are, of course, conventional categories of sacred and secular music; but, aside from textual or contextual (or sometimes sub-textual) features, trying to pinpoint what makes the categories *sonically* distinct can be a fruitless exercise. The same goes for binaries of “good” or “higher” versus “bad” or “lower” music—subjective labels that tend to isolate music from the experience of it, and usually tell us more about the creator or listener than about the music itself. The old adage of “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure” should caution against making definitive statements about a piece’s superiority or inferiority, especially given the cultural and subcultural diversity of musical styles and norms, as well as the strong role of personal preference. Vonnegut’s own listening habits, as revealed in the recent documentary *Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck in Time* (Weide and Argott, 2021) included writing along to easy listening “elevator music”—the sort of recordings critics habitually ridicule and almost never revere.

Yet, the notion that all music is sacred is not really about taste or how music is perceived through our inescapably judgmental ears. Rather, it is an idealization echoed elsewhere in Vonnegut’s fiction, where music (again, mostly in the abstract) is a beautifying, humanizing, and ennobling force in an otherwise harsh, random, and absurd existence. Vonnegut affirmed this view until his final days, writing, “let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music” (2006).

In its inclusiveness, this attitude is similar to naturalist John Muir’s “positive aesthetics,” wherein every natural landscape, no matter how attractive or unattractive by conventional human measures, is beautiful by virtue of its pristineness (Muir 1894, 48–73). Muir contrasted this perspective with that of his artist and photographer companions, who sought out picturesque vistas and angles resembling the composition of works of art. Human intrusions into these settings, including selective representations of them, can only diminish the natural beauty.

While the views of Vonnegut and Muir may be untenably romantic, underlying them is the original sense of “sacred,” a term rooted in the Latin *sacrare*, meaning “to set apart.” The natural world is, according to Muir, set apart from the human constructed world, and is therefore thoroughly special. Music, too, is set apart in important ways (acknowledging that defining “music” is a contentious prospect well beyond the scope of this introduction): musical sounds are perceived as distinct from other sounds; words set to music rise above everyday speech; musical sounds can penetrate deeply into otherwise untapped areas of consciousness; music has “extra-physical” power over our emotions; music suggests something greater than ourselves; our musical propensities separate us from other species (advances in zoomusicology notwithstanding) (Friedmann 2015, 169). To be sure, the extent to which any of these qualities are reflected in a piece is determined by a variety of personal, cultural, educational, situational, dispositional, and other factors; but music’s close association with religious rites and spiritual practices suggests an intuitive appreciation of its “sanctity.”

And yet, music is not, in fact, separate from the human experience. On the contrary, across cultures and throughout human history, singing and instrument playing have been integrated into a wide

array of other activities—from work and worship, to love and war, to celebration and mourning—and even conceiving of music as an attraction or commodity in and of itself is a relatively recent and mostly Western concept. Much like Muir’s observation, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe” (Muir 1911, 211), so, too, is music hitched to everything else in the human experience. Along these lines, it is instructive to note that when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously dubbed music “the universal language of mankind” (Longfellow 1851, 4), he was not suggesting that music transcends linguistic barriers or that it is perceived the same way from person to person or community to community. Instead, he stressed that music has universal *functions*—in the case of his examples, work songs. The phenomenon of music is ubiquitous but like language, it exists in many forms and dialects.

The foregoing discussion alludes directly and indirectly to several perennial quandaries in music criticism and aesthetics. Are musical categories, be they judgments or genres, sustainable in any objective sense? To what extent can music, especially without the potential (but not always) clarifying aid of lyrics, convey definite meanings or ideas? How much of music’s meaning is determined by the music-makers and how much by the auditors? Can music ever be appreciated for its own sake, or is it always attached to extra-musical feelings, associations, judgments, and/or activities? Are there any standards that can be applied across musical examples or types? What constitutes the “good” or “beautiful” or “genuine” in music, and what might be their opposite? Why do certain sounds evoke generalized emotions, and how consistent are those responses inside or outside the music’s cultural setting? More broadly, does music need philosophical discourse, and does philosophy have the proper tools to address music?

To these can be added a series of tensions presented by Paul Rinzler in his book, *The Contradictions of Jazz* (2008). Although his subject is jazz aesthetics, these contradictions—or “dynamic tensions” where “two opposites are present and are fully expressed, yet are in conflict” (8)—are felt in the full range of musical expressions: individuality and interconnectedness; assertion and openness; freedom and responsibility; creativity and tradition. At the same time, Rinzler is cognizant that music is fundamentally experiential; these tensions arise in the musical moment and work themselves out (or not) in that temporal present. “The most important thing about jazz—to me, at least,” writes Rinzler, “is how it sounds. Jazz is music, and music, in general, is meant to be heard and enjoyed. But after the sounds die away, as they must, curiosity can lead us to start thinking about these sounds and how they were produced” (xiii). So it is with virtually all musical discourse: first comes the sound, then comes the reflection.

The difficulty of capturing or deciphering music in words is largely why the same questions continue to be asked and the same tensions continue to be explored. Contributors to this special issue add fresh perspectives and new insights to these enduring themes and inquiries, looking at music in both the general sense and examining specific musical pieces, movements, and moments. Each article has its own focus, makes its own arguments, and occupies its own branch(es) of philosophy: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, politics, and, of course, aesthetics. Beyond the centralizing subject of music, what ties them together and into the best of philosophical traditions is that they not only ask big questions but also, in seeking to answer them, add more questions to the ongoing discourse.

Before closing, it is helpful to explain, albeit cursorily, the key terms of this special issue: criticism and aesthetics. Music criticism entails the application of critical faculties to understanding music or some aspect thereof. This broad conception departs from more rigid definitions, such as making judgments on the value or “excellence” of individual performers, performances, or pieces of music. Adjudication is only part of the music criticism mosaic, and is not always paramount or even necessarily present. Aesthetics includes not only classical concerns about the nature and appreciation of musical “beauty,” but also the sensori-emotional cognition of “aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 13): whether or not (and how) a piece of music “works” to charm, alarm, calm, aggravate, please, disconcert, and so on. In other words, musical aesthetics is the interaction of music and perception (Friedmann 2018, vii).



Despite the deceptive concision of these definitions, the key terms—like the term “music”—remain hotly debated. Rather than taking up more space here, it is best to leave the complexities (and perplexities) to the talented and accomplished authors of this collection.

*Academy for Jewish Religion, California, USA*

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# What's the Point of the Philosophy/Aesthetics of Music?

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ANDREW BOWIE

Philosophers who make music their object of analysis tend to regard it as something to be explained in a theory that makes true claims about its object. As one might expect, this gives philosophy the dominant role in its relationship to music, because it supposedly makes intelligible something which *prima facie* lacks a certain kind of intelligibility. An obvious problem here is that, despite the proliferation of theories in the 'philosophy of music' or 'music aesthetics' – I don't distinguish the two: the reasons to use 'aesthetics' seem to me essentially historical rather than conceptual, as the term in its usual senses only emerges in the modern period (see Bowie 2003) – their claims diverge quite radically. This almost constitutive divergence poses questions about the status of such theories. Are we just waiting for someone to 'get it right' with respect to what a musical work is, or to what it is that music expresses, etc., given that this doesn't actually seem to occur? And what exactly would be achieved if we had such answers: would they make people perform or listen to music in very different ways? 'Knowing the answer' in this issue can in fact be seen as likely to go against the very nature of what is being investigated, for reasons we will come to see later. This situation is, of course, not going to make people give up articulating theories which seek to answer notionally philosophical questions about the nature of music, or, for that matter, any other object of philosophical inquiry. Nor should it, as such theories can illuminate aspects of what is at issue in new ways, even when they prove to be untenable as definitive theories. However, the philosophy of music can also give rise to meta-reflection on what it may tell us beyond what its practitioners see it as doing. The consequences of such reflection can, I want to suggest, 'turn the tables' with respect to aspects of the music/philosophy relationship, because music can be seen as questioning some prevalent ways of doing philosophy, in a manner which is arguably itself 'philosophical'.

One immediately apparent aspect of the philosophy of music as practised particularly in the mainstream analytical tradition is that the issues it raises are generally versions of the same issues that appear elsewhere in philosophy. Musical 'ontology' seeks to locate music in the same kind of categories as apply to other objects. Theories of emotion and music similarly see music in relation to other ways in which emotion is instantiated. The talk is often of the kind of 'properties' possessed by music, and how these properties relate to subjects playing or listening to music. This comes down to how to commensurate what pertains to the subject responding to music with what pertains to the object 'music', and this generates a large part of the agenda for the philosophy of music.

One example of this approach is the idea that music involves 'response-dependent' properties, and this points to a basic problem. If something only exists to the extent that it elicits a response, it seems odd to call it a 'property' of an object. The notion of property indicates something constitutive of an object, which is presumably in some sense independent of its being apprehended in a subject's response to the object, otherwise it wouldn't be 'proper' to that object. The equivocation here points to a deeper issue: the model of a subject relating to an object, which raises issues of location, like that of emotion with respect to music, is characteristic of the epistemological focus of much of modern philosophy, which, so far also without any generally agreed answers, analyses the subject's and the object's contribution to the constitution of the world, often in the attempt to refute epistemological scepticism (see Bowie 2022, which sees the sceptical problematic as actually a manifestation of other tensions in modern humankind's relationship to world). In the case of music it is, however, not clear

that, even if it were to prove possible, establishing what the respective contributions are in conceptual terms matters a great deal, and sceptical doubts of a cognitive – as opposed to an evaluative – nature are rarely relevant to what is at issue in the practice of music. The fact that many of the predominant issues in the philosophy of music seem to matter little to those engaged either in mainstream analytical philosophy, or in the actual production of music may involve a failing on the part of those practitioners, but it may also suggest something lacking in the ‘philosophy of music’, and in some of the philosophical approaches upon which it relies.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Bowie 2007 and 2022), one alternative way of looking at the issues here is in terms of the philosophy of music as something which can be construed both in the ‘subjective’ and in the ‘objective’ genitive. Rather than see the philosophy/music relationship solely in terms of what philosophy tells us about music, which can lead to the difficulties suggested above, one can explore the relationship in terms of what music may ‘tell’ us about philosophy. From what has been said so far, this perhaps rather abstruse-sounding idea can actually be easily illustrated: music ‘tells’ us that discursive philosophy has considerable trouble answering questions about music in a manner which achieves any kind of durable and widespread consensus. It also tells us that a philosophy which takes music as its object is often not central to what those who produce and receive music actually do. It isn’t that composers and performers don’t have ‘philosophical’ ideas about what they produce – think of Wagner after he read Schopenhauer – but their actual production is not necessarily determined by such ideas. The standard response of some philosophers of music to these issues is to maintain that music is either more mysterious than other things, from the other arts, to verbal language, etc., or has been neglected by philosophy, and that philosophy needs to try harder, because music has been ‘philosophically misunderstood’ (Kivy 1997 p. 139).

Martha Nussbaum has suggested one approach to how such responses can be questioned – though her focus on ‘works’, is perhaps rather restrictive, given the importance of involvement in music as a practice which we shall consider in a moment:

Musical works are somehow able – and, after all, this ‘somehow’ is no more and no less mysterious than the comparable symbolic ability of language – to embody the idea of our urgent need for and attachment to things outside ourselves that we do not control, in a tremendous variety of forms (Nussbaum 2001 p. 272).

In such a view the relationship between self and world is not conceived of primarily in cognitive terms that involve classification of the object by establishing its conceptual status. Instead, the kind of relationship involves an openness to what connects us to the world in meaningful ways which is not reducible to what we can know or say about such connection. The basic issue here is that if we didn’t already understand music through our involvement with it before we seek to understand it in philosophy, there would be no issue for philosophy. Music is not just noises that can be described in physicalist terms, and this points to the kind of understanding that it involves, namely an understanding which engages us – and not just emotionally – before we seek explanations, and which is not reducible to such explanations. It is this kind of understanding, which enables music to be heard as music at all, that seems to me to be philosophically most significant, because it is part of how we inhabit the world, and make sense of ourselves and the world. Heinrich Bessler, a musicologist and pupil of Heidegger, suggests that ‘The musical originally becomes accessible to us as a *manner/melody* [*Weise*’, which combines the older sense of ‘melody’ with the idea of ‘way’ or ‘manner’] of *human existence* (‘des menschlichen Daseins’)’ (Bessler 1978 p. 45).

If one thinks in very crude historical terms about some ways that music and philosophy have related, what is at issue here can be made more accessible. In some ancient philosophy music reflects a pre-existing order of things (for example, in the ‘harmony of the spheres’); in Plato philosophy is to legislate which kinds of music can contribute to the order and well-being of the polis, and which are destructive of that order; in some religions music is seen as a form of praise for God, as part of religious ritual. When, in the modern period, the idea of an inherent order of things established by

a higher power comes into question, music and its reception increasingly become objects of scientific inquiry, and, in the philosophy which sometimes sees itself as offering theories akin to those of the natural sciences, becomes something to be explained, in the manner we have seen. However, in contrast, from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, music also comes to be understood in the West as a challenge to attempts to order the world in purely cognitive (or ethical) terms, as suggested, for example, by the ‘idea of absolute music’ (Dahlhaus 1978; see Bowie 2007). Precisely because of its resistance to being fully cashed out in conceptual terms, music is seen as making kinds of sense that can be obscured by a predominantly cognitive stance. The crucial fact here is that this shift goes along with fundamental historical changes in the understanding of language, that develop as the notion of language’s divine origin loses credibility. The effects of these changes are, significantly, still apparent in the divide between analytical, and hermeneutic (European/‘continental’) philosophical approaches to language.

Charles Taylor has suggested understanding this divide in terms of ‘designative’ theories of language, associated with Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac, which ‘favor the description of independent objects above everything else’ (Taylor 2016 p. 189), and ‘constitutive’ theories, associated with Hamann, Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, in which ‘language opens up new ways of articulating our grasp of reality’ (ibid. p. 174). The point in the present context is that music can be said to constitute new forms of sense in the world by offering new ways of relating to ourselves and the world, and, as such, can be seen as analogous to, or a form of philosophy. The rapid, often critically contested, radical changes in Western music from Bach onwards, or in the history of jazz, are hard to understand if the music in question is seen, for example, as just expressing what Kivy terms ‘garden variety’ emotions.

The fact that music becomes central to significant parts of secular modern cultural life further suggests that it is better understood in constitutive terms, given that our ‘grasp of reality’ includes affective aspects, somatic responses involving rhythm and tone, the possibility of generating new sense through involvement in musical production and reception, and the possibility of challenging existing forms of musical sense that may come to conspire with what leads to social pathologies. Important here is also the way in which music (and other art) may cease to make sense in changed circumstances, but can also keep renewing its sense as well. The awareness that the greatest music of the modern period from Bach onwards is still ‘alive’, not least because it still offers new interpretative possibilities, is central to how we should seek to understand music.

In thinking about the nature of language we use the same language as we are seeking to grasp: the use of metalanguage depends on a prior understanding of language and so cannot involve a wholly external viewpoint on language. The attempt fully to grasp language as an object of observation is therefore ruled out, and music can be seen in related terms. At the same time, language and music are, though, not just objects to be observed, but something in which we participate as part of what constitutes a world of meanings. As such, philosophical attempts to objectify music and definitively articulate it in concepts are intrinsically open to question. Even the simple fact that you can’t replace the sense a piece of music makes to a player or listener with a description of that sense indicates why. It is not that the attempt to make discursive sense of music is therefore to be renounced. Hermeneutically and philosophically informed analysis of music, of the kind present, for example, in Adorno’s characterisations of the music of Beethoven or Mahler, clearly enables us to grasp more of what we experience in the music. But equally important is the fact that such experience has an ineliminable aspect which resists conceptual articulation. The fact that we so often have recourse to metaphor in seeking to characterise music is an indication of this. This resistance to conceptuality has to do with why music can stay alive for us, and with why this has important implications for philosophy.

‘Experience’ for many kinds of philosophy is something involving some kind of essential relationship to the world, such as the empiricist apprehension of sense-data, or Kantian constitution of knowledge. The aim of the notion is to incorporate potentially endlessly different moments of human existence into identities that are made possible by concepts. Clearly this is vital for human survival and development, but in a world where such identification based on the reduction of

difference to identity becomes the dominant factor in how things are responded to, the importance of the idea that experience involves more than is manifest in conceptualisation also grows. This idea is essential to the emergence of aesthetics in modernity and to the challenge music can pose to modern philosophy. Jazz pianist Thelonious Monk famously suggested something of what is at issue here with his remark, when someone complained that something that was being played was wrong, that 'Wrong is right'. The sense that music makes is not something predetermined by the rules which music necessarily also involves. It is precisely the transgressing of rules which is characteristic of the development of modern music (and, in related ways, the other arts). What drives this continual movement beyond given norms has to do precisely with a different conception of 'experience'.

The sense music makes is not exhausted by the ways in which we seek to grasp that sense, not least because that sense is constituted in active participation in music. In a discussion of Schelling's idea of 'positive philosophy', which seeks to get beyond a notion of experience that relies on identification based on a system of established concepts, Dalia Nasser suggests that:

the meaning of the artwork is not exhaustible, and this is *precisely because* it cannot be determined by what preceded it (by its condition) or made into an object within a series of conditions. It is this present-oriented character of looking at works of visual art, or listening to a work of music, that, I think, epitomizes progressive philosophy (in ed. Bruno 2020 p. 245).

Experience here involves openness to new sense, which can be hidden by existing forms of articulation and expression. John Dewey suggests:

If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and auditory qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence (Dewey 1980 p. 74).

In his recent work on belief and knowledge, Jürgen Habermas has focused on the way in which aesthetic and religious considerations point to different ways in which we think about philosophy and the ways it makes sense. The following remark on the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christianity suggests a model which is directly applicable to issues relating to philosophy and music: 'In the encounter with Christianity, philosophy learns to take domains of experience seriously that first have to be disclosed performatively through participation in a practice before they can then be made into an object of investigation' (<http://habermas-rawls.blogspot.co.uk/2016/04/transcript-of-habermas-acceptance.html>). He points to the ways in which rituals make sense primarily in terms of participation, and analogises this in certain respects to what takes place in art.

The analytical approach to philosophy can tend to disqualify philosophical appeals to what cannot be cashed out propositionally, hence the direction of the philosophy of music described above, where answers to questions about music are assumed to be a discursive articulations of something non-discursive. 'Language' in such an approach is, as we have seen, primarily regarded in designative terms, which means music cannot be a language. In one sense this is uncontentious, if one characterises language in terms of singular terms, predicates, and the like. However, if one attends to ways in which sense is constituted in broader terms, as suggested by Ernst Cassirer's notion of 'symbolic forms', which lead beyond themselves to enable sense to be made of the world in a multitude of ways, one can meaningfully talk of 'languages of art'.

Habermas develops the analogy between ritual and art by considering how it can actually affect conceptions of language. He warns against 'decoding every form of behaviour that is somehow formalised as though it were a text' (Habermas 2019 p. 223), and suggests that in this context 'the comparison of the language of rituals with the "languages" of art' can be illuminating. Although 'autonomous artworks have a syntax and a semantics that can only be mastered by competent speakers', there is a limit to how far the 'content' of works of art, such as symphonies, 'can be grasped in words', and the limits 'make us aware that aesthetic experiences can be conceptually circumscribed and explained, but cannot be incorporated *without remainder* into explicit judgements' (ibid.).

Works of art involve ‘symbolic, but not linguistic communication’, and he cites Adorno on the ‘similarity to language’ of instrumental music (ibid.).

The point is that music is both inseparable from language, insofar as it is a symbolic form, and yet is not a language, if language is conceived of in designative terms. Music resists interpretation of the kind that we employ for many verbal texts, though the dimensions of sense revealed in interpreting poetry are closely related to those present in music. At the same time, music is also something that is interpreted in its own manner. As Adorno says in the ‘Fragment on Music and Language’: ‘interpreting language means: understanding language; interpreting music means: making music’ (Adorno GS 16 p. 253), which necessarily involves non-verbalisable forms of understanding. As such: ‘Whether a phrase is played in a meaningful manner can be precisely converted into technical correlates like accents, pauses for breath, etc. But in order to carry out this conversion one must first understand the meaning of the phrase’ (Adorno 2001 p. 159). The phrase is understood in part through its relationships to the contexts in which it is located which give it its meaning. The recurrence of a phrase in a sonata recapitulation offers a very basic example of what is at issue here. In a successful performance how the phrase is initially played will be affected by this recurrence, and this meaning can be largely lost through failure to take adequate account of its relations to its contexts. Although there will always be conflicts over whether an interpretation is adequate or not, the simple fact that what is at issue involves a particular kind of normativity that means we seek to argue about it indicates that it is not randomly ‘subjective’. As Wittgenstein and Adorno both suggest, communication of such norms often has to do with gesture – orchestral conductors often do more with gesture than with verbal explanations of how a passage ‘should go’ – and relates to communicative responses to the world like facial expressions and bodily movements of the kind that are present, for example, in dance.

In a discussion of the tension between symbolism and explanatory philosophical language in the communication of early Christian doctrine on the meaning of the crucifixion, Habermas echoes aspects of the model suggested above that we related to music:

For the symbolic embodiment of a semantic content can be more readily illuminated from the perspective of a participant, i.e. from the view of the communicative use of symbols in contexts of action, than from the perspective of an observer who wishes to investigate the relationship between the ways of being of mental contents and the material substrate of signs (Habermas 2019 p. 545).

Underlying this is the idea that we understand through what we do in ways which can be prior to, and which may resist, objectification of what we do. As participants in the enactment of a ritual or the performance of music we experience a kind of sense which is lost if it is reduced to what can be observed from a third-person perspective. The question is, then, what philosophical status one attributes to this kind of activity.

Great music, be it Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge*, or Coltrane’s *Love Supreme*, can be said in certain respects to make at least as much sense of the world as great philosophy. Great philosophy, be it Plato’s *Republic*, or Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, cannot be said to be great because it is true, because nobody is in a position to assert anything final about its truth. As such, its importance lies in the way it offers renewed opportunities for making new sense by being reinterpreted, and thus changing how the world manifests itself for us. In this respect it is analogous to music. At the same time, the nature of propositional language means that philosophy has to make truth claims that are inherently likely to be doomed to failure. Novalis claims in his *Fichte Studies* that the ‘Absolute which is given to us can only be known negatively, by our acting and finding that no action can reach what we are seeking’ (Novalis 1978 p. 181) – which explains early German Romantic claims about philosophy’s inherently ironic status (see Bowie 2020). Moreover, the fact that philosophical claims are doomed to inadequacy does not have to lead in Hegelian fashion to something more adequate. Music, on the other hand, lives precisely from its circumventing of any kind of claim to definitive sense – hence its link to Romantic irony – such that its failure to make finally determinate sense is part of what enables it to make renewed sense in differing contexts. This might seem a far-



etched position, but if we think in terms of the ineliminable finitude of the sense we make of the world, including in philosophy, the modes in which we make sense can be subject to different kinds of appraisal, and which of these is 'philosophical' cannot be decided by stipulation.

Music clearly comes into what Habermas sees as 'domains of experience [...] that first have to be disclosed performatively through participation in a practice', and there is no way of fully stepping outside of what we participate in, such that we can finally say what sense it makes in propositional terms. If we say with A.W. Moore that metaphysics is the attempt to make 'maximally general sense' of things (Moore 2012 p. 146), the 'language of art' that is music can be seen as necessary to metaphysics. As such, Heidegger's contention that modern science is the culmination of metaphysics, via 'the dissolution of philosophy into the technologized sciences' (Heidegger 2007 p. 73), may restrict the scope of 'metaphysics' in a manner that can be questioned via music.

Herbert Schnädelbach has suggested one approach to these issues can involve 'negative metaphysics', 'the warranted reminder that discourse does not have complete control of the true and the good: that there is something here which cannot be anticipated by a method, but which must show itself and be experienced' (Schnädelbach 1987 p. 171–2). The natural sciences' replacement of theology as the dominant means of explaining the world is accompanied by the development, in Descartes, Kant, and others, of philosophy focused to a significant degree on grounding such explanation, sometimes at the expense of attention to forms of meaning which are essential to the life-world, that resist explanation from an observational perspective. It is no coincidence, then, that around the same time – from the eighteenth century onwards in the West – as views of language that involve the idea of its constitutive nature emerge, music increasingly moves from being a subordinate art to being regarded as a resource for making philosophical sense of the kind suggested by Schnädelbach (see Bowie 2007).

Wittgenstein's remark in *Philosophical Investigations* that 'Understanding a sentence in language is much more related to understanding a theme in music than one thinks' (Wittgenstein 1984 p. 226) suggests how what is at issue here has implications even for analytical philosophy of language. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein contrasts what can be said with what can be shown, thus adverting to dimensions of sense which escape analysis in terms of constative utterances. Modes of attention to the objective world, such as memory, anticipation, affectively coloured perception, awareness of the quality of the passing of time – which play a crucial role in music – are not part of the objectifiable world, because the sense they make is through the way in which subjective and objective affect each other and change their very status in so doing (see Bowie 2022). As Dewey puts it: 'The oppositions of individual and universal, of subjective and objective, of freedom and order, in which philosophers have revealed, have no place in the work of art' (Dewey 1980 p. 82). Music's capacity for successfully evoking particular experiences of such modes of attention involves a kind of normativity that anyone seriously involved in music, where attention to details of articulation, tone, expressiveness, timing is crucial, has to understand, however imperfectly they may do so.

One manifestation of this normativity is present in the ways in which music can be 'wrong' in a manner related to the way in which utterances can be false, and are felt as such. In both cases we have a sense of 'That's not right', though it may be experienced differently in music and in language. Whilst one is often able to give propositional reasons why music is wrong, especially if a dominant technical norm is transgressed, there is a limit to this, as suggested by Stanley Cavell: 'It is essential in making an aesthetic judgement that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? ... Because if you do not see something, without explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss' (Cavell 1976 p. 93). Once again the role of participatory sense which resists final discursive articulation, but plays a decisive role in how we communicate both about and in art, is decisive.

So how does this make music 'philosophical', in the sense of the 'philosophy of music' in the subjective genitive? As we saw above, a key aspect of the development of music in modernity is suggested by Monk's comment that 'Wrong is right'. Unlike in cognitive advance, where theories are generally overcome in the name of a more comprehensive account of the object in question and

its relations to other objects, changes in what is 'right' in music need not follow any kind of normative logic. The rationalisation of the tempered scale from Bach onwards, as Max Weber argued, does, admittedly, follow something like such a logic: 'Only the tempering of the scale brought complete freedom to [modern harmonically based music]' (Weber 1921), because it equalised intervals between notes, allowing endless possibilities of modulation between keys. But it is precisely the freedom this brings which is central to what modern music reveals, and to the idea of music's capacity to make new sense. Rather than giving an answer or explanation, music keeps space for new meaning open, at the same time as the sense it makes in the present can demonstrably enhance peoples' lives. By constituting new ways of making sense via new forms of articulation, music adds to what makes sense of the world in ways which cannot be predicted by a theory.

This sense can be exemplified, for example, in terms of the ways rhythm helps locate one in the world that do not involve the constitutive split between subject and object present in cognitive relations to the world, as well as enabling somatic and psychological states that are unattainable in other ways. Schelling refers to rhythm as 'the transformation of a succession which is in itself meaningless into a significant one' (Schelling 1856–61: vol. I/5, p. 494; on this, and the relation to rhythm of Kant's schematism see Bowie 2007). Such transformation is again something which precedes its conceptualisation and is present in the most basic ways in which nature is experienced as ordered, as well as in the ongoing history of the development of new forms of musical rhythm. In this respect philosophy seen in the terms of a thoroughly temporalized modern world is a derivative form of such transformation.

The philosophical power of music from a modern secular perspective resides in one respect in how it can offer a temporary freedom from ineluctable negative aspects of finite human experience by incorporating them into itself and symbolically transforming them. Daniel Barenboim comments that music, which 'is so clearly able to teach you so many things', is also able to 'serve as a means of escape from precisely those things' (Barenboim and Said 2004 p. 122). In the period of the elevation of music to greater philosophical dignity from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the West the form of diatonic music often becomes increasingly focused on the creation and resolution of harmonic tension that can end with a triumphant culmination, most strikingly from Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> to Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony. The pattern of such works relies on the overcoming of negativity such that a kind of redemptive sense emerges from this process itself, as any engaged listener will testify. The fact that art music, from the later Mahler and Schoenberg onwards, then comes to put such resolution in question by expanding and then leaving behind much of traditional harmony echoes the way in which philosophy in Nietzsche and others renounces the idea of a world whose meaning is inherent within it. With Mahler, Adorno claims, music 'caught up in an original manner with Nietzsche's insight that the system and its unbroken unity, the semblance/illusion [*Schein*] of reconciliation was not honest' (Adorno GS 13 p. 213). Whereas the loss of such a world can lead to nihilistic consequences in some scientific philosophical responses, which seek to explain everything, including music, in reductionist terms, in music itself responses to disenchantment can lead to new sense that is generated by active participation in music.

The story of modernity, philosophy and music told by Adorno can now be seen as too dependent on a particular Western conception of rationalisation, which seeks to fit music into a specific philosophical frame, based on the idea that technical command is common to the development of modern Western societies and the most 'advanced' music. These days it would be hard to sustain this kind of philosophically framed, universalised notion of musical development, though attempts to link new kinds of music to socio-political and philosophical developments can still be revealing. Adorno works from the assumption that the Holocaust has destroyed any possibility of making metaphysical sense of history, even in art. At a global level, this captures something important, but we also need to appreciate how music still offers resources for meaning that, while renouncing any generalised redemptive metaphysical sense, can still resist forms of social, psychological and political repression, offering or sustaining hope for a different world. The history of jazz, for example, testifies to this.



Moreover, music can keep open channels of communication between people who hold irreconcilable views on philosophical, political, and other issues, as the history of the effects of jazz on opposing racism in some contexts, or the spread of 'world music' suggest. The shared sense that music can make possible – it can, of course, do the opposite, dividing people in other ways – may be contingent and fragile, but if one of the tasks of philosophy is the enabling of shared understandings of the world, music may sometimes achieve this more effectively in real social terms than discursive philosophy. As such, the present exclusive focus in some areas of philosophy on music as an object over which we need to gain conceptual command needs to take more account of the ways music may make the kind of sense which such philosophy cannot. In participating in music the sense of a division of subject and object is often only present when something is not right; at other times, the way we are absorbed in listening to or playing music can offer a temporary reconciliation between ourselves and the world. This may turn out to be merely ideological, and so can be misused politically, as modern history shows, which is why modern music often aims at undermining existing forms of sense in music. At the same time, without such experiences of sense which are not primarily cognitive, and which can constitute new responses to a rapidly changing world, our philosophical responses to the world would lack essential dimensions.

Royal Holloway, University of London

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# Where Does Music End and Nonmusic Begin? Fine-tuning the “Naturalist Response” Problem for Nontonal Music’s Naturalistic Critics

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LANTZ FLEMING MILLER

**Abstract:** As to what distinguishes music from other sound, some investigators in both philosophy and cognitive scientists have answered “tonality.” It seems subservient even to rhythm. Tonality is considered to be the central factor around which the piece is oriented; it gives a sense of home, expectation, and completeness. Most important, much of this inquiry builds on naturalistic, evolutionary explanation to account for human nature and behavior. The conclusion of such line of thought is that sounds missing tonality or tonal focus cannot be music. This article challenges such sort of naturalistic criteria distinguishing music from nonmusic. Permitting certain sets of sounds to be considered music does not necessitate denial or approval of naturalistic explanations but does allow nontonal music to serve a part of human and musical evolution.

**Keywords:** atonal music, evolution and the arts, naturalism, nontonal music, tonality

*How irksome is this music to my heart!  
When such strings jar, what hope of harmony?*

—Henry the Sixth, Part I. II,I,56–57.

*The time, moreover, that that a person requires—as I required in the matter of this sonata—to penetrate a work of any depth is merely an epitome, a symbol, one might say, of the years, of the centuries even that must elapse before the public can begin to cherish a masterpiece that is really new.*

—Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Within a Budding Grove* (tr. C. Scott Moncrieff) (405).

A current strain of naturalism in philosophy and cognitive science promises to solve long-standing problems by looking to the human evolutionary story. Such naturalism in ethics, for example, makes the influence of selective forces a foundation of descriptive and even normative ethics (Boniolio & De Anna, 2006). Naturalism in art theory and aesthetics explains the arts as universal, evolved human phenomena exhibiting particular characteristics because of natural-selective forces (Carroll, 2004). My concern is that some naturalistic criticisms of nontonal music<sup>1</sup> take too narrow approaches for the naturalistic program’s own good. The article’s main point (Part II) contends that research into musical experience, emotions, and origins does not justify naturalistic contentions that nontonal music is unaesthetic. The secondary point (Part III) is a suggested alternative for naturalistic aesthetics.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The “Natural Response”

I consider naturalism in philosophy of music and music cognition to be the approach that, building on (interlinked) evolutionary, biological, and cognitive bases, explains why humans universally and uniquely as a species make music and why such sequences of sounds are comprehensible to us

and move us. Naturalistic musical aesthetics turns to the results of such evolutionary inquiry as bases for assessing the quality of musical works.

In his *Philosophy and Literature* review of *Piano Notes* by pianist Charles Rosen, Dutton (2003) criticizes nontonal music from a “natural-aesthetics” viewpoint. Dutton praises pianist Rosen’s performances, renowned for their limpid interpretations (“non-interpretations,” if you will), which de-emphasize performer interpolations so compositional subtleties may shine. A music scholar in his own right, Rosen understands great masterpieces’ structural intricacies. His repertoire ranges from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s sonatas, through Schumann and Chopin, to Debussy and beyond. Natural-aesthetician Dutton diverges from Rosen at this “beyond.”

Rosen sees his “beyond” composers, including Boulez, Carter, and Berio, continuing the canonic line from Bach. Dutton objects. While Rosen admits such contemporaries have yet to gain the popularity of earlier composers and blames performers for not working harder introducing the modern, Dutton proposes that the nontonal compositions are not high-quality—because of their very nontonicity.

Acknowledging, like Rosen, that modernist art of all genres makes audiences uncomfortable, Dutton finds modernist music persistently annoying: “Listeners may not be merely ignorant, tone-deaf conservatives when they exclaim, ‘I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it!’ But Rosen is in no mood to be fair and puts the arguments in favor of modernism at their robust best” (291). Dutton explains that modernists like Rosen neglect “the natural response”: “an aesthetic naturalist . . . [asks] what is the partial ‘natural response,’ and how big a part does it play? I wish [Rosen] had directly addressed the topic” (292). Dutton describes what is unnatural and thus unaesthetic about avant-garde music: It runs against our evolved music-appreciation faculties, which prefer, he implies, sweet and fat over “spinach.”

All arts involve experiencing structural relationships, Dutton explains. To experience these, in temporal arts such as music (arts experienced qua arts over time), audiences must remember a work’s earlier parts. They expect what is to come based upon what came before. Such expectation, Dutton contends, is crucial for aesthetic pleasure. However, nontonal composers sabotage the means to those expectations and pleasures: They reject the natural, tonal musical language which cues us into expecting what comes next, according to what came before (as parts of a sentence do). Nontonal compositions involve sounds disconnected from an order natural to humans: The listener, while struggling to construe what has already sounded, is also stripped of clues as to what follows. Listeners would best voice their natural response and protest nontonal music’s intrusions between Schubert and Haydn in concerts.

Dutton overlooks Indian raga music which is not exactly nontonal but, being improvisatory nonetheless is not structured in such a way that audiences can readily predict where it is going next. Which Dutton finds so necessary to defining music apart from noise.

Tonality is Dutton’s critical ingredient distinguishing music from non-music (or, at best, pseudo-music). He notes that our era itself is not debilitating composers: Some neotonal works, such as Britten’s and Shostakovich’s, exhibit complexity comparable to avant-gardists’ yet allegedly attract wider audiences, further evidence that avant-garde composers forsake “what comes naturally.” The evolutionary forces that shaped the creature’s brain presumably shaped the creature’s artifact called music. That brain is what delimits music, much as it delimits language, for which not just any sort of garble can qualify. The brain does not register a sleeper’s random smacks of lips as language, or the slams of car doors or atonal scratches on violins as music. Theorists may fool some brains that those sounds are music, as snake oil salespersons fool some that their concoctions are medicine. Such facts about the human brain are, in Dutton’s summary judgment, why modernism in music has been an aesthetic debacle.

## 1.2. The Prospect

In *The Art Instinct*, Dutton positions musical experience within his larger evolutionary theory of arts. Composer and musicologist Ler Dahl (1988, 2001) also criticizes nontonal music within a natu-

realistic framework, contending it fails to appeal to the requirements of an innate musical “grammar.” He faults composition-theorists:

Much twentieth-century music arose from compositional systems spawned not by knowledge of how the musical mind works (this knowledge is only now emerging)... but by the ideology of historical progress... [which] led to mutually incompatible and largely private compositional codes. Without guidance from study of musical cognition, this result was in retrospect predictable, for the musical mind does not spontaneously learn arbitrary system. (2001, 381).

Both he and Dutton, as well as Raffman (2003, 2011), offer a delimiting or external<sup>2</sup> critique of what music comprises and contend that, despite nontonal music-theorists’ hypotheses, nontonal music falls outside the delimitations.<sup>3</sup> I question whether these critiques take the right naturalistic approach.

Towards that end, I first ask whether the anecdotal evidence provided for nontonal music’s failure with audiences is adequate or accurate. Next, I review recent research into musical experience, emotion, and evolutionary origin which is germane to the criticisms. From this review I derive two observations: 1) theories of musical experience and origins are far from settled as to what are innate, natural, or evolved responses to music and thus what are the essential parameters of music; and 2) even if these theories were more settled and accepted, empirical studies of dissonance and nontonal melodies so far offer little support for the argument that these elements cannot be essential features of aesthetically appealing music.

One attraction of natural-aesthetics theories is that they offer a demarcation between art and non-art, music and non-music. I am questioning whether the way some commentators have made the demarcations is the best way.

## 2. The Inadequacy of the External Naturalist Criticisms of Nontonal Music

### 2.1. The Audience Issue

Has audience response indeed exemplified that nontonal music is an aesthetic debacle? Disregard for now that what counts as aesthetic success is a problem (see §2.4). The external criticisms commonly turn to a supposedly empirical fact: Audiences dislike this music. Is this a bona-fide fact? It may seem one could simply query audiences. However: (1) Which audiences? Only “classical” music audiences? These, though, as Boulez (1986) notes, are highly fragmented (“ghettoized”). Which subgroup represents “experienced listeners” (Lerdahl’s [2001] term)? Or should the entire human population be sampled? After all, much television and movie music has adopted nontonal techniques, so the “non-experienced” listener may be better-suited. (2) Which works and questions? Play a well-known movie’s nontonal music and ask the non-experienced listener “Does this succeed as music?” or “Do you like this?” By either question, tonal and nontonal works alike could fall short without revealing whether it was the tonality or nontonality hobbling them. (3) Which time-frame? Audience tastes fluctuate. These three issues involve untangling from taste something universal and innate, which thing comes intimately coated in taste. Furthermore, (4) what percentage of audiences exhibiting dislike signifies aesthetic shortcoming?

An alternative for now is anecdotal evidence, responding to that of nontonal music’s critics. The oft-quoted history of how, soon after arch-avant-gardist Boulez assumed the New York Philharmonic’s helm from Bernstein, subscription sales nose-dived from 100 percent, has a flipside: While Boulez maintained his modernism campaign, within a few years subscriptions remounted to 95 percent (Rosen 2000). Either audiences were masochists—unlikely in such numbers—or learned to appreciate Boulez’s modernism. For his “Rug Concerts” in the season’s final two weeks, 1500 “people were turned away every day, seven days a week.” (Rosen 2000, 311, fn.3). Notably, Boulez’s audience-age declined. There may be a learning factor in nontonal-music appreciation. But it is implausible that these audiences are forcing themselves to sit through what their brain is processing as non-music while a certain, socially cowering brain-region insists they sit anyway, to appear

sophisticated. Otherwise, opera-haters and detractors of nontonal music may be comparably cogent: A case against audiences' favoring nontonal music could apply to those listening to tonal Western classical music, even if tonal-music audiences are larger now. In both cases, someone's delimitation of the genres that comprise good music is pitted against positive audience response.

We may have to grant reasonable sincerity in certain audiences and musicians. Rosen (2000) made firsthand observations of audiences and performers: "conductors and solo performers programmed works they liked to play" (312). Conductors both present and past have faced technical challenges in new works: Composers often stretch the limits of instrumental technique, and orchestra-members balk. Performances suffer. But in time, instrumentalists improve. Once the bar is raised for instrumental technique, the challenging works enter the repertoire hand-in-hand with the new levels of virtuosity,<sup>4</sup> and musicians find them increasingly interesting and emotionally involving. "The music that survives is the music that musicians want to play. They perform it until it finds an audience," Rosen writes. "The most significant composers are those who gain the fanatical loyalty of some performers" (303).

A number of nontonal composers have gained such loyalty among performers—and audiences. Rosen, alongside notable pianists such as Paul Jacobs, has performed and recorded Carter's piano works. The record catalog reveals recordings of Boulez's piano sonatas and Ligeti's difficult concerti and piano etudes by several pianists. Note that instrumentalists' preparing works is not comparable to a curator's clearing a museum nook for a readymade: Musicians dedicate dozens, hundreds, of hours practicing, memorizing, drilling fingers into uncharted difficulties, work rarely undertaken unless they love the piece. Notably, New York Philharmonic conductor Gilbert directed a May 2010 production of Ligeti's opera *Le Grande Macabre* at Lincoln Center. No less hidebound an institution than New York's Metropolitan Opera has Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* and Schoenberg's *Moses und Aaron* in its standard repertoire. Operas are not "forced in" between Haydn and Schubert symphonies: The massive Met audiences are unlikely making themselves sit through three hours of what their cognitive-limbic systems are registering as the aural equivalent of car-door-slamming. As Rosen (2000) notes, listener responses to nontonal music can be quite emotional: "To those who admire Schoenberg's music the emotion [in it] can often seem all too intense to the point of hysteria." (304) The analogy—nontonal works : music : : readymades : artwork—is a disanalogy. The readymades may better be considered, as Raffman (2003) characterized Cage's *4'33"*, as works of philosophy; the nontonal works have passionate followings who adore the music itself, theory or not.

General audience response hardly implies modernist music's aesthetic shortfall. A modernist music-culture exists; its critics' brunt is to show this culture is unnatural and wrong (see §2.3). Perhaps experimental and other psychological studies and theories of musical experience can offer empirical evidence of natural-aesthetic response.

## 2.2. Research: Musical Experience, Emotions, and Evolutionary Origins

In the past three decades, cognitive science has inquired extensively into the nature of music: how we can experience certain sets of sounds as a unified phenomenon "music," why these sounds evoke emotion and what is the nature of this emotion, and how humans evolved a capacity for music. The diversity and inconsistency among these inquiries so far attest partly to the subject's newness, complexity, and challenges. The field's current state, though, hints how empirical research may ultimately bear on naturalist music aesthetics, particularly for nontonal music.

My review of musical-cognitive research could be much longer, but I have space for only the most representative.<sup>5</sup> Inquiry into how we experience sounds as music extends back at least to Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates discusses the different modes and their psychological effects. An oft-cited contemporary milestone in this inquiry is Lerdahl and Jackendoff's 1983 *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (GTTM). Looking to generative linguistics, GTTM explains how apprehension of music involves listeners' breaking down hierarchically structured musical elements. While music



does not communicate semantic content, a piece has a certain organization and much of the aesthetic and emotional pleasure arises from apprehending that organization. As linguistic grammar is organized around the sentence, musical grammar is organized around the tonic. Like the sentence, the tonic tops a generative tree. All other tones in the piece are digressions from that tonic home and derive their “meaning” within the piece through their role in relation to it.

GTMM borrows much from centuries of Western music-theory and from Schenker’s hierarchical musical analysis. But GTMM’s originality is its set of rules that give this hierarchy a cognitive framework. The “music surface” is the perceived acoustic signal. The music grammar involves rules mapping the surface to the deep structure or tonic. The listener applies well-formedness rules (WFRs) to group the notes into regular, hierarchically organized patterns. WFRs also operate on metrical structures to analyze the hierarchy of strong and weak beats. Other WFRs apply to pitches, which listeners subject to “reductions,” that is analyze each note’s pitch-relation to the piece’s tonic. By a “time-span reduction,” each pitch is assigned a structural importance in relation to the grouping and the metrical structures. Finally, WFRs for “prolongation” sort the progress of pitches into a directionality of tension increase or relaxation.

Listeners’ analysis of these four components should not vary greatly among performances of the same work or among (experienced) listeners. More variant are the deeper preference rules by which the listener sorts the groupings, meters, and reductions across the entire piece, noting patterns among them to apprehend more complex structural coherence. Sorting can vary among performances of the same piece, contributing to the richness of musical experience.

The tension/relaxation driven by the prolongation reductions likely influences emotional response. Thus, there is an emotional/cognitive connection in apprehending tonal music. If music developed with our evolving brain over human prehistory, GTMM helps explain why the emotional component is integral along with the higher-cognitive. Cognitive apprehension of music is tied to constant tensing and relaxing, which seem to have an emotional affect. The tonic provides the primary “head” from which to orient the structures which guide our emotional response.

GTMM has made an influential and “important contribution to cognitive science,” DeBellis (1999) notes (471). It has effectively switched psychological musical research into the cognitive track, and much subsequent work is in positive or negative response to it. DeBellis questions whether GTMM can explain more than a subset of music—that based on a type of eighteenth-century Western tonal syntax. Also, as Mithen (2006) states, “few musicologists have accepted that this [GTMM] musical competence is equivalent to a grammar like that of language” as “rules of a musical style and the rules of a language are profoundly different” (20).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the pivotal role that GTMM assigns to the tonic has been central to much naturalistic criticism of nontonal music, as in Dutton (2003), Lerdahl (1988, 2001), and Raffman (2003, 2011).

Raffman (1993) turns partly to GTMM to explain why musical experience is ineffable. But this explanation leaves unclear whether nontonal music somehow neutralizes or negates the cognitive pathways to such ineffable experience and so cannot properly evoke musical emotions. However, cognitive-science research into musical emotions offers glimmers of how people respond to tonality and nontonicity and so may illuminate nontonal music’s emotional nature.

Juslin and Västfjäll (2008) propose a theory of six psychological mechanisms whereby music evokes emotions:

- brain-stem reflexes;
- evaluative conditioning, which associates music to a listener’s emotions;
- emotional contagion, by which a listener perceives that a musical work is attempting to evoke certain emotions;
- visual imagery, which listeners intentionally invoke;
- episodic memory, whereby music evokes specific event-memories from listeners’ lives;
- musical expectancy (much like GTMM’s prolongational-reduction), by which the work’s structure induces the listener to expect certain outcomes and so pulls the emotions different directions.

Each of these mechanisms appears to be not specifically musical but basic psychological or “distinct *brain function*” (568). Musical expectancy, for example, not observed in young children, requires general learning capacities: The listener must learn a musical system’s syntax, which, like language, may involve “a common set of processes for syntactical integration” (568).

This theory promises insight at least into response to musical dissonance. Dissonance, particularly “unresolved,” is a salient feature of nontonal music. If it invokes entirely dis-pleasing emotional responses, the contention that music dominated by this feature is unaesthetic may gain plausibility.<sup>7</sup> Brain-stem reflexes and musical expectancy are relevant to the effects of dissonance on musical emotions. “Brain-stem reflexes are quick and automatic,” the authors note, and brain-stem responses to “[s]ensory dissonance is suggestive of ‘danger’ in natural environments. . . . Dissonance may have been selected by evolution as a negative reinforcer of behavior” and so is unpleasant to the listener (564). However, in experiments, five-year-olds could not identify chordal dissonances as “wrong,” while nine-year-olds could, indicating a possible learning factor by which cultural influences shape expectations and responses. Yet, cultural traditions may build upon “natural” negative responses to dissonance, and only later-developing learning capacities may prompt the listener as to what to expect in sequences of consonances and dissonances. The authors also mention studies revealing that infants react unfavorably to dissonances, so this empirical issue is still open. Most important, the question remains as to whether strings of unresolved dissonances in music are intrinsically unpleasant to the point of universal aesthetic violation.

Alcorta, Sosis, and Finkle (2008) criticize Juslin and Västfjäll for accounting for the *how* but not the inextricably related *why* of musical emotion—why it evolved. The “close relationship between soci-ality, sanctity, and music offers important insights into emotional responses to music and suggests possible adaptive functions for those responses that shed light on both proximate and ultimate causes” (577). Evolutionary psychology and related research has investigated psychological and emotional responses to music and why it was evolutionarily adaptive. Justus and Hutsler (2005) acknowledge that while some characteristics of music may be strictly cultural, others seem to be “programmed into the human genome” (8) thus universal and innate. They propose innate constraints upon music: Humans tend to

- perceive similarities in the octave and simple ratios such as the major fifth;
- arrange pitches into scales and shape melodies into contours that ascend or descend through a scale;
- group notes and find underlying rhythmic regularity;
- divide scales by unequal intervals.

However, the authors conclude that these constraints do not assume cognitive mechanisms evolved particularly for music. Each constraint may be shared with other domains. For example, harmonicity heuristics involved in auditory scene analysis would use the same grouping of tones with overlapping harmonics as required in octave grouping. Further research into innate constraints could as well reveal that attribution of such constraints to cultural phenomena is misguided or vice-versa. In sum, the authors find no evidence that music is a cognitive domain specifically shaped by evolution.

McDermott and Hauser (2005) take a similar approach but more hesitantly conclude it is too early to ascertain whether music is or is *not* an evolutionarily shaped domain. They believe that innate brain features must at least partly constrain music. To determine the degree to which uniquely human innate traits, culture, or generally adaptive traits (shared with other animals) constrain music, they turn to four types of empirical evidence—developmental, comparative, cross-cultural, and neural. The evidence includes:

- Music widely consists of pitch changes and simple pitch ratios.
- The octave has a likely biological basis.
- Musical cues for emotion are culturally invariant.
- Tonal melodies are processed differently in the brain from nontonal ones.

Infant and comparative studies indicate humans uniquely may have a preference for consonance over dissonance. Other findings germane to naturalistic aesthetics are more equivocal. They describe musical intervals as either “natural” (or simple, such as the major fifth) or “unnatural” (or complex, e.g. the tritone). Developmental studies indicate that these interval-types, when played simultaneously or sequentially, invoke differential infant response. However, melodies commonly proceed by such complex intervals as the major or minor second, and there appears to be a universal sensitivity for such melodies (though scant evidence that this sensitivity is due to innate brain structures).

Most germane to this article’s concern are the postulated general preferences for tonal melodies with “natural” harmonic intervals, infant preferences for consonance over dissonance, and findings about differences in tonal and nontonal melody processing.<sup>8</sup> Assume research firmly establishes transcultural preferences for natural-interval, tonal melodies. That finding may help explain phenomena such as how songs exhibiting these traits, often from the West, attain worldwide popularity (barring, say, cultural hegemony). However, at least three concerns arise: whether 1) such a finding indicates that melodies lacking this trait cannot truly be melodies or that pieces with such melodies are unaesthetic or not music; 2) preferences for consonance mean that heavily dissonant music is unaesthetic; and 3) tonal melodies are indeed processed in different brain structures from nontonal, whether the latter is unaesthetic or not music at all.

While positive responses to these questions may support an argument that nontonal music is unaesthetic (but see §§3.2–3.3), it is unclear whether they would imply that nontonal music is not even music. Transcultural natural-interval preferences, consonance preferences, and differential cerebral-processing of melody types together do not establish that nontonal music cannot be apprehended as music through other cerebral mechanisms. More generally, *has* evolutionary development indeed shaped the human brain so as to rule out certain sounds as music? Hauser and McDermott (2003) propose an evolved “musical faculty” analogous to Chomsky’s “language faculty.” Comparative studies, the authors note, suggest that language builds upon prehuman physiological/perceptual adaptations; other comparative studies indicate that music may similarly do so. Insights into music’s prehuman phylogeny as “protomusic” and other species’ sensitivity to music should help delineate its uniquely human aspects. Just as the stipulated language faculty in infants sorts sounds into language or non-language, the conjectured music faculty sorts sounds into music and non-music. While we share with other species, as phylogenetically distant as birds, some physiological/perceptual adaptations for processing sounds, the uniquely human part of the music faculty seems to have an ability to sort certain sounds as music. Thus, perception of the octave and major fifth, natural intervals, and probably dissonance-versus-consonance has a prehuman basis, whereas our ability to combine certain sound elements and assimilate them as a whole, as a piece of music, is human. This story may put an evolutionary constraint on the kinds of sounds we could call music. But no evidence indicates that these constraints can be stretched so as to exclude nontonal music (see §2.3).

A host of other evolutionary theories maintain that music either builds upon existing adaptive mechanisms or is a specifically adapted mechanism itself.<sup>9</sup> Despite this division, most of these proposals concur that whatever sounds count as music must be constrained by adaptive biological traits (whether or not those traits are specifically adapted for music). Pinker (1997), Dutton (2010), and Ball (2011) assume such a constraint, while they assign different statuses for music’s adaptation. Pinker’s renowned “cheesecake” hypothesis holds that music appeals to general-psychological adapted traits but is itself adaptively superfluous (a “spandrel”), somewhat as cheesecake appeals to adaptive cravings for sweets and lipids but is nutritionally superfluous. Dutton maintains that all artistic drives are specifically adaptive (and Ball confirms this notion specifically for music). The arts are intrinsic to humans’ survival as social beings with particularly adapted brains. We want to experience music because, as with the other arts, natural or sexual selection has molded our brains to find it appealing. Pinker and Dutton also assert that, whatever cognitive adaptations music appeals to, they have well-defined characteristics (such as the ability to perceive octaves), and nontonal music cannot appeal to them but flies astray of the musical-cognitive net. (Ball is more moderate about nontonal music; see §3.2.)



Other theorists offer yet other scenarios of music's originating from music-specific adaptations, as Dutton proposes, although from different adaptations. Dissanayake (2006, 2008) says music originates from social-bonding, primarily infant-mother bonding, with behavioral modifications ensuring long-term relationships and care. These behaviors—movements and sounds—were ritualized by adults, becoming dance and music. With origins deeply rooted in human psychology, these arts are both universal and easily appreciated cross-culturally. Mithen (2006) looks beyond the mother-infant relationship to sexual selection—namely that of females' choosing mates—which brings the arts to the fore of early-*Homo* social life. He proposes a proto-music/language cognitive domain which later diverges into music and language. These two social “organs” thus have related origins and central functions in society although different characteristics. Brown (2007a and b) similarly postulates a proto-“musilanguage.” All three theorists bring up the possibility that, if music did have such origins and even (as Brown suggests) occupies a cognitive domain that neuroimaging may illuminate, music as a phenomenon has certainly grown and expanded from simpler origins to something more complex (whatever the limit on that complexity may be).<sup>10</sup> Such expansiveness will be significant in my discussion.

### 2.3. Discussion

A couple of conclusions can be drawn from these studies into musical experience, emotions, and evolutionary origins. One is that, as McDermott and Hauser (2005) persuasively argue, it is too early to decide whether music is a specifically adapted cognitive domain. A second is that, even if the research community becomes more unified concerning these theories of musical experience, emotions, and evolutionary origin, the evidence so far already points to music's having less rigid definitional borders than Dutton (2003), Lerdahl (1988, 2001), Raffman (2003, 2011), or GTTM assumes.

For one matter, the definitional border appears to be broad and hazy, hardly a solid line. Infant and other developmental studies indicate that, much as with language-acquisition, children need to grow into apprehending music as distinct kinds of sound, as well as to react to it fully emotionally (Trainor and Trehub 1992, 1994). But the possibility infants react negatively to dissonance, as Peretz (2008) finds, does not imply such sounds are non-music. After all, tonal music employs dissonance extensively; there is no clear demarcation on how extensively composers may allow dissonance before they lapse into non-music. (Wagner and Debussy abound with unresolved dissonance but their works are no longer labeled “non-music.”) Later, children learn to identify “jarring” dissonances as inappropriate in a piece. It does not seem that the infants' “negative” reaction to dissonance means that “jarring” or “unresolved” dissonance is inherently inappropriate in music. The postulated differences in neural processing of tonal and nontonal melodies points only to these melody types' being processed differently, not to one being a “truer” melody type. Musical-cognitive research into perception of nontonal melodies provides some insight. Krumhansl, Sandell and Sergeant (1987) found wide differences among listeners' ability to detect atonal (dodecaphonic) melody structures, according to listeners' musical training, with better-trained listeners processing structure at levels better than chance. While these results do not indicate whether such melodies are less “true” than tonal, they allow that some listeners can perceive some level of such melodies' structures. Finally, the ease by which certain kinds of simple tonal melodies are transmitted to other people, say by humming, is no evidence that such melodies have an aesthetic advantage; it simply means these melodies are more transmissible. If transmissibility (“humability”) of melody were an aesthetic standard, much of tonal classical music would suffer. (Try humming most of Bach or of Beethoven's piano sonatas.) These findings indicate that nontonicity likely does not mark the line between music and non-music; instead, tonal shades into nontonal and, possibly, nontonal shades into non-music.

For a second matter, the border and so the area within appears to be expanding. Darwin (1952), Dissanayake (2006), McDermott and Hauser (2005), and Mithen (2006) suggest music began sim-

ply, such as pitched moans, rhythmic tapping, or notes on primitive instruments. Over millennia and in different cultures, scales and modes developed, melodies grew complex, harmony was added, rhythms became elaborate, multiple modes and scales became available, major and minor keys and the well-tempered scale developed, dissonance/consonance contrasts grew fuzzier and chromaticism more daring. Whichever theory of the musical-cognitive domain finally prevails should account for this expansion. The theory that there is no dedicated domain but that music builds upon other domains can readily account for the expansion: As music expands and grows more complex, it builds upon more cognitive domains. For example, if the first music were pitched, consonant moans, and if consonance is neurally processed differently from dissonance, then when music added dissonance, it likely built upon another cognitive domain.

The theory of a single dedicated musical-cognitive domain has more difficulty explaining expansion. First, it is implausible that when such a domain first appeared—say via pitched moans a mother sang as a lullaby—the domain contained all that was cognitively necessary to apprehend, say, Wagner's *Ring*. If there is a single musical-cognitive domain, somehow since its inception it had to have expanded to incorporate music's increasing complexity. Either (1) when evolution selected it, it contained the seed whereby it may expand, or (2) through further adaptation (via selection), it expanded. The former is vague at best (and at worst, for nontonal music's naturalist critics, begs the question<sup>11</sup>), while the latter is unlikely: It is doubtful that in the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century there was natural selection for Europeans who well-apprehended the well-tempered scale.

My purpose is not to decide between a dedicated-domain or multiple-domain theory.<sup>12</sup> The point, rather, is that hazy broad borders and continual expansion appear to be characteristics of music which any theory of musical experience, emotions, and origins must explain. Indeed, neurophysiology may one day reveal neural architecture accounting for music's hazy borders and continual expansion.

#### 2.4. Problems with the External Critiques

Consider then that music's dimensions have been expanding and human brain-structures allow that expansion. If at least some people can apprehend and appreciate contemporary nontonal music, human brains must be structured to allow that apprehension. Neither Dutton (2010) nor the other investigations into musical emotions, experience, and origins I described, excepting Ball (2010; see §3.2) offer sufficient evidence that contemporary nontonal music does not fall within that expansion. The natural aesthetics of Dutton's (2003), Lerdahl's (1988), or Raffman's (2003, 2011) external critiques of nontonal music then lacks basis.

To the objection that there may be some study somewhere or one to come that may justify these criticisms, I reply that the cognitive research discussed here is so interconnected with other work in the area it is unlikely such a study is lodged in some cranny; the burden rests on the critics to evince it. As for future studies, they are moot for either side.

These criticisms do make intrepid attempts at naturalizing aesthetic judgment. Certainly, across the world are many kinds of music, and likely many people can never appreciate them all. But naturalistic aesthetics so far lacks evidence indicating why some types of music, especially the nontonal, are unaesthetic. In fact, it needs to account for the musical-aesthetic expansion I have been discussing.

Dutton (2003) compares nontonal music to vegetables, but the comparison can backfire. Mozart and Schubert would presumably be the evolutionary equivalent of high-fat, high-sugar foods; we have but feeble, evolutionarily instilled desire for dull old vegetables. Yet, vegetables *are* food, potentially fulfilling, and though they may never attain the hamburger's popularity, some people esteem them as among the greatest foods. It is implausible that aficionados of nontonal music are aesthetically fooled. Instead, it would be more perspicacious, first to acknowledge these tastes' validity, then explain how they fit into the high-fat/high-sugar evolutionary story and humans' expanding tastes, and then critique avant-garde tastes within their category.

A naturalist empirical theory of what is good and “bad” (or simply “mediocre”) music faces a basic challenge. Among many possible ways to proceed with such empirical assessment, three suffice for the present discussion:

- (1) Rely on one’s own judgment and universalize it.
- (2) Declare that whatever appeals to the widest range of listeners is the standard.
- (3) Rely on the judgment of each music culture and subculture.

The external critiques I discuss use a mixture of (1) and (2). These critics observe *they* do not respond well to nontonal music, then justify this response by asserting it appears to be universal since this music does not appeal to most if not all humans. The problem with (1) is its aesthetic egoism can too readily be whimsical; but these critics neutralize it by coupling it with (2). However, (2) begs the question: How do we know that what has the widest appeal is what’s good? Mired in (1) and (2), these critics lose cogency. The advantage of (3) is that it defers the judgment to the subjects themselves and so avoids question-begging. It is naturalistically sound, in that it acknowledges there is aesthetic judgment but lets the judgmental content be determined by the groups of musicians and listeners who fine-tune those judgments. This approach may be accused of aesthetic relativism,<sup>13</sup> yet acknowledging real groups form the basis of aesthetic judgment still leaves the naturalist with the hard work of determining what is universally good among these groups (and thereby also circumventing “absolute” relativism). I support (3) further in Part III.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. A Suggested Remedy for Naturalism

#### 3.1. Preliminarily, Taking the Positive Response as a Fact

As long as musicians enjoy playing nontonal music, as Rosen notes, they will find audiences, even if these are not the size of those for Puccini. And yet, if recorded car-door-slamming wins a few followers, it still may not qualify as music. Researchers face the challenge of characterizing the hazy, broad border between music and non-music.

Naturalistic approaches may here prove useful for nontonal-music aesthetics. One matter to explore is how listeners process nontonal melodies. Perhaps these melodies are processed by cognitive functions that build upon those that process tonal melodies. That is, nontonal melodies may register in one level of the cognitive apparatus that recognizes well-ordered strings of sound as melodies but, lacking the tonic head, may not undergo certain further processing, while still evoking musical-emotive response. To make progress, then, researchers must acknowledge that many listeners *do* respond positively to nontonal melodies, even if others do not. To continue the music-language analogy, concrete poetry and related styles, such as that of Rene Char, are hardly non-poetry or bad poetry or non-linguistic when they employ words disembodied from the “tonic-head” of sentence or phrase structure. Such styles simply build upon standard cognitive-linguistic functions to evoke new effects.

#### 3.2. The Approach: Recognizing Musics as Aesthetic Cultures

The best way to describe the approach I am suggesting for naturalistic music-aesthetics may be as “anthropological,” studying aesthetic cultures and subcultures as given phenomena. The approach grants that different aesthetic subcultures, whether math-rock’s or classical-avant-garde’s or Indonesian progressive, produce bona-fide music. It would benefit cognitive research by accounting for how music is practiced by *all* humans rather than fencing the field too narrowly in “the fastidious evasion of real music” (Maconie, 2007, 67). The naturalist may then, if so motivated, determine what is good, bad, or mediocre within, say, math-rock. Every genre, including nontonal, will likely have good and not-so-good pieces. (And subcultures sometimes overlap: Someone in the “lullaby” subculture may also be in the “dodecaphonic” subculture.)<sup>15</sup>

This approach should withstand charges of relativism, as should anthropology practiced with appropriate judgment. As anthropologist Davis (2009) defends such practice, it is not unnecessary to accept every human behavior because it exists; in reality, no serious anthropologist upholds the elimination of judgment. Anthropology, Davis contends, instead asks that we strive to suspend judgment from our own culture's particular ethical point-of-view in establishing a more catholic viewpoint. In naturalistic aesthetics, we may proceed similarly, by suspending our individual aesthetic viewpoint to establish one more ecumenical. Judgment must be used in determining what counts as a valid culture; Nazi Germany or Taliban Afghanistan would not qualify. A small group that gathers to listen to car-door slamming as "music" may reasonably not be assessed as a valid music subculture. (It is doubtful this group would last long; longevity may prove one reasonable criterion for validity.) What exactly are the criteria for validity is beyond this article's scope. My suggestion is simply that, if anthropology can moderate relativism with reasonable judgment, naturalistic aesthetics can.

In different ways within a naturalistic framework, Ball (2010) and Davies (2009), exemplify such catholic approaches to all musics. Ball is less aesthetically polemical than the cited external critiques. Music is an indelible reality in human life: "*You could not eliminate it from our cultures without changing our brains*" (5, original emphasis). In many cultures, there is no good or bad music; making music is good in itself. So "*music does not have to be enjoyed*" (5, original emphasis).<sup>16</sup> Ball sees nontonal-musical practices as valid music subcultures, even if these often disregard "cognition": "Some modern music is indeed somewhat fearsome in its retreat into hermetic ways of shuffling sound with no regard for cognition. But part of the responsibility for [audience] fears must lie with the [audience] attitude...." (411). Davies likens avant-garde subcultures to esoteric Australian-Aboriginal painting traditions that demand certain arcane knowledge for full appreciation, without thus being less legitimate.

### 3.3. A Further Step Back: Musics Are Naturally Evolving Phenomena

Exactly what distinguishes the aesthetically worthy from unworthy will continue to intrigue. The suggested approach, if used reasonably, without too fine-grained distinctions among subcultures, should still allow discussions of which musical works are more aesthetically interesting or profound—a Beethoven or a Stamitz symphony, a Ligeti or a "minimalist" movie score. Yet an important fact, easily neglected, is that it is musicians who create new works of music. A handful in history have possessed unusual sensibilities whose effects on a music-culture they could not fully anticipate themselves but that in time strongly influenced other sensibilities. Such evolution, at least in Western art music, has been ongoing for centuries. The effects of these sensibilities' output on the world and on other artists must play out to some degree before observers can even pinpoint these sensibilities, much less their effects.

Can cognitive research guide this evolution? Currently, a few among this creating handful, such as Lerdahl, are also philosophers or cognitive researchers. Lerdahl (2001) notes his cognitive theory, an update of GTTM, becomes "less systematic when explaining atonal and chromatic listening experience... The ambiguities of derivation reflect the uncertainties in listening to atonal music" (381). While he faults nontonal composers, what has fallen short so far may be the cognitive theory that cannot account for positive response to nontonal music.

It is unclear whether the study of music cognition is generally necessary for composers. Certainly, the sensibilities of cognitive-researchers/composers such as Lerdahl may be influenced by their research (and vice versa). The works of these composers may in turn influence other musical sensibilities in the process of musical evolution. Yet, my last point here: at least some time must elapse, and even then it will be difficult to see where musical evolution is going (and difficult to say how long this time may be). Trying to affect it via a cognitive theory will likely not result in the intended or predicted effect. Trying to direct or force this evolution too hard, were the effort even successful, might be too constrictive and stifle some great artistic achievement. (More likely, many strong

artistic temperaments would shirk such limitation.) In this way, as the naturalist in the field is subservient to the ecology, the musical-cognitive researcher is subservient to musical evolution. The evolution continues; the researcher observes and theorizes about what has evolved. But as long as most musicians are not cognitive researchers, and most of them do not request cognitive researchers' opinions before creating, these researchers might best, for their own work's sake, let the creators create. In the meantime, audience members may read the fascinating research to understand their musical cognition better.

*CUNY Graduate Center, USA*

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> By "nontonal" I refer to a broad set of art music, whether Western, African, or Eastern, that has been developing since the work of Schoenberg, Ives, and Varèse in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the West it has continued through Berio, Stockhausen, Boulez, Ligeti, and Carter. I use this term "nontonal" throughout instead of "atonal," which sometimes specifically describes dodecaphony. Sometimes nontonal music is called "modernist" or "avant-garde." Admittedly it is not a well-defined set, as heavily chromatic music such as later Wagner or much of Debussy may be called "nontonal." While this article forgoes the definitional problem, I believe among most readers there would be a reasonably consistent notion of the music I am discussing. The term does not include non-Western music not centered on a tonic, such as Indonesian gamelan. One typifying characteristic of abandoning tonality is the omnipresence of "unresolved" dissonance, specifically trichords and minor and major second and seventh chords without resolution to "consonance." (I generally do not use "dissonance" in its strict early-19<sup>th</sup>-Century sense of any stray from standard chord progressions.)
- <sup>2</sup> See fn. 14 concerning "internal" critiques.
- <sup>3</sup> Maconie (2007) discusses other external criticisms that take a naturalist perspective.
- <sup>4</sup> Witness the gradual rise in technical difficulty of violin concerti from Vivaldi to Mozart, Paganini, Brahms, and Ligeti.
- <sup>5</sup> Raffman (2011), working under the assumption that "the artistic merit of 12-tone music" (599) is questionable, offers another, somewhat broader review of the same territory.
- <sup>6</sup> Whether music is communication is an integral issue in many of the works cited, but they assume music either is or is not, without discussion, so the issue regrettably remains wide open. Cross (2009) takes a firm (if controversial) stand that music and language are complementary communicative tools.
- <sup>7</sup> Such plausibility assumes an aesthetic theory, not one I necessarily assume, but one that appears to run through much of the naturalistic criticisms of nontonal music. Developing a theory of musical aesthetics is not my present purpose, but a naturalistic theory demanding that response to music be pleasurable must establish that pleasure is essential in aesthetic response. See discussion of Ball (2010) in §3.2.
- <sup>8</sup> Hauser and McDermott (2003) report that rhesus monkeys process tonal and nontonal melodies differently, indicating "that tonal melodies have a special status even in nonhuman primates." (665)
- <sup>9</sup> Unfortunately I lack space to detail the debate over whether music was a product of group, individual, or gene—or sexual or natural—selection. Some theories I discuss take sides; others do not.
- <sup>10</sup> *Musicae Scientifcae's* 2009 special issue on "Evolution and Music" offers further theories of music's origins.
- <sup>11</sup> That is, that seed could simply expand to include nontonal music.
- <sup>12</sup> While multiple-domains can more readily explain expansion, dedicated-domain more readily explains music as a seemingly unitary, distinct phenomenon. Perhaps in the end a fusion of the two will prevail—say one selected-for domain that taps into other domains in such a way that it can expand.



- <sup>13</sup> However, any taint from ethical relativism should not carry over to aesthetics until ethics and aesthetics are shown to be equivalent in this respect; also, see §3.2.
- <sup>14</sup> Raffman (2007) offers an internal critique of dodecapronic music, which she asserts is undermined by its own criteria. She says that this music relies upon the listener's capacity to process a piece's twelve-tone row in all its permutations throughout the work. Such processing, as Schoenberg theorized, is essential for appreciating the music. However, experiments indicate that listeners, even trained avant-garde musicians, have difficulty following permutations throughout a piece. Therefore, this art is guilty of fraud and so is non-art. I contend her proof is hardly of fraud but of an understandable mistake about listeners' cognitive capacities. Fraud is a deliberate effort to deceive when the perpetrator knows the information given is false. Raffman's internal critique then falls apart.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthen (2010b) provides the basis for an alternative defense of modernist music, in that "A work... creates an auditory scene that is not natural – it is a range of auditory objects" that a composer selects, and appreciating it involves attending to "accidental relations between different auditory objects in this scene," such as contrapuntal harmonies (86).
- <sup>16</sup> But see Schubert (2009) for a proposal that music must be pleasure-inducing.

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# On the Redundancy of Music

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STAN ERRAUGHT

**Abstract:** This paper argues that recent transformations in the means of production and dissemination of recorded music have changed, not simply the ways in which music is consumed, but have also changed the way in which music can be understood, both epistemologically and ontologically. By epistemology in this case, I mean, not just what we know about music, but what we know through music. By ontology, I mean not just what music is, considered as content, but also what music is, considered as artefact.

The essay will proceed in three sections. The first part, drawing on Adorno, will argue that music has, at least potentially, the ability to de-familiarise the world and our sense of our subjectivity and its limits. I argue further that this has – and must have – a critical function.

The second part will argue that the advent of recorded music represented a significant ontological shift. The recording, as artefact and inscription, imported a fixity of exact timbral authority into musical types: put simply, in popular music, ‘the track’ replaces ‘the song’.

My final section attempts an analysis of how both of the above considerations have shifted with the general replacement of physical instantiations of recording by streaming of remotely stored content.

I conclude that: (1) streaming has decentred the notion of the ‘work’ that survived into the era of recording; (2) streaming has diminished the critical potential of popular music and, (3) that streaming and associated technologies have contributed to a potentially grievous ‘data-fication’ of subjectivity.

The paper draws largely on Adorno and the more recent work of Robin James, as well as some empirical research into contemporary musical consumption practices.

**Keywords:** Adorno, Robin James, streaming, ontology of music, epistemology and music

## I

We are sometimes not sure if a piece of music is supposed to be a police order, a teaching aid, or a medical prescription.<sup>1</sup>

Hanslick’s disdain for the notion that music might be instrumentalised is rooted in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*: the ‘uselessness’ of music its warrant of inclusion in the ranks of the beautiful. Adorno was equally dismissive of the notion that art might ‘give us something’:

Those who brag of having “got” something from an artwork transfer in philistine fashion the relation of possession which is strictly foreign to it.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is the very resistance of the artwork to this relation of possession, and the acquiescence of the ‘hit song’ to use value as ‘the backdrop for all kinds of psychological projections’ (AT 265) that distinguishes the art work from its culture industry produced imitation.

Music, in this formulation, is *supposed* to be redundant, irreducible to use value, and thus the guarantor, the gold standard to which subjectivity is indexed: it allows the bourgeois an intimation of a beyond, a metaphysics unmoored from religion.



Nevertheless, despite this history of mandarin resistance to both commodification and reduction to instrumental value, it remains the case that music and musical works have always been employed in the service of purposes beyond the parameters of philosophically approved aesthetic experience. As even Adorno admits, Kantian 'disinterest' hides 'the wildest interest', nothing less than providing the secure ideological foundation for bourgeois subjectivity as an alibi for its rootedness in exploitation. (AT 11) More pragmatically, the employment of music as, to use Tia De Nora's phrase, 'technologies of the self' characterises how many of us orient ourselves to music and musical works.<sup>3</sup>

The susceptibility of music to instrumentalisation is thus a given: not only is music used 'for dancing/ for relaxation/ for exercise' but musical works are created explicitly to be so used and packaged as such. Nor is Adorno's demarcation of the artwork and the debased products culture industry product along this diremption supportable, at least not in marketing terms. Classical works are routinely repackaged as meditative or even soporific aids.

One of the more obvious ways in which this reduction of music to use value proceeds is through the promotion of music as a promoter of wellbeing: Hanslick may have been joking when suggesting that music might be 'prescribed' but this now happens, and routinely.<sup>4</sup> The literature on the relation between music and 'wellbeing', itself a deeply problematic notion, is ever-growing and, if nothing else, provides a rationale for funding musical research.

'Wellbeing' itself is, or should be, a contested notion, but, as with many agreeable sounding bits of ideology that populate the 'mind, body, spirit' sections of bookshops, it slides all too easily into the slipstream of the neo-liberal curriculum. Academic workers feel the need to justify their existence in terms of the expanded market – the market within which mental health, rather than being a social problem, becomes the personal project of the subject-entrepreneur-consumer.<sup>5</sup>

Music in this world then, is not just valuable for the traditional, and not unproblematic reasons offered by traditional aesthetics. It is useful *and* therapeutic: but as therapy that is *an*-aesthetic, that reconciles the subjects to the indignities and inanities of the culture they inhabit and to which every act of consumption contributes.

For Adorno, of course, it was precisely the job of the artwork to act as an irritant *against* such a reconciliation: to hold open the crack in the totalising net of practice and discourse that closes around the subjects of 'late' capitalism. Music was the paradigmatic case of this: by its very 'enigmaticalness', music came close allowing access to, or at least awareness of, the occluded core of subjectivity – the 'X' the 'thing that thinks' that is the uncanny other of the public self. (AT 122) Music does not, in this view, 'mean' anything: rather, it identifies the limits of meaningfulness and the constructed-ness of all epistemologies. Music thus, for Adorno, 'thinks': and thinks beyond the capacity of philosophy. Music unfolds, not to reveal the 'what' of philosophy, to illustrate a point, to be an example: it unfolds *as* philosophy, rehearsing the processual quality of thinking, the necessity for one thing to follow another (AT 177), playing out in its own constructed time the essential insight that temporality is the unavoidable condition of any representation whatsoever – but also that it is not 'real' in the sense of being a predicate of things in the world. Things merely are: they exist *for us* in time (and space) because it is only as represented according to these conditions that we can apprehend anything. With music, we come closest to grasping this – musical time synthesises an imaginative world that shimmers with possibility: carrying with it a conviction of a truth that is otherwise than the empirical world of the understanding, but feels no less necessary. The *sensus communis* that Kant employs to underwrite the claims of taste translates, for Adorno, into the simpler, but perhaps more powerful, claim that 'music says We directly, regardless of its intentions' (AT 167).

<sup>6</sup> This 'We' is not an appeal to anything as fluffy as a common humanity: rather 'the force with which the private I is externalised in the work is the I's collective essence' (AT 167). This 'essence' is not some moral quality but more simply, perhaps, the orientation towards the making and apprehension of meaning that constitutes our social being: the engine that drives us to develop concepts by which we take up the sensorium. This 'engine' is at the same time the most opaque part of our mental

equipment and least individuated. If nothing else, this points to the illogic, or at least the limits, of the notion of 'personal taste' – it might be argued our own canons of 'meaningful songs' are breadcrumbs we drop on the journey through the forest of memory and association to arrive at the edge of the abyssal awareness of the oxymoronic 'necessary contingency' of such a trail.

It would be a mistake to see this 'engine' as a-historical, however: it is not an immutable organ of meaning gathering and generation that organises the world into concepts according to 'the categories'. This is where Adorno's Kantianism becomes Hegelian: as he writes 'the aesthetic We is a social whole on the horizon of a certain indeterminateness, though, granted, as determinate as the ruling productive forces and relations of an epoch' (AT 168). Art points to this 'social whole' while at the same time affirming its impossibility in the face of the fracturing of the relation between the atomised individual and the possibility of a collective existence 'beyond the spell of labour'.

Mattin suggests, however, that though, following Kant 'we know our own subject only as appearance, not as it is in itself', the we/I that does the knowing can collect itself in such a way that the awareness of that unknowability ceases to terrify us.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing variously from Metzenger and Sellars, he arrives at a view of the 'self' as a necessary fiction that allows us to maintain a consistent perspective on the world, but one that is based on an objectification, or, in Sellarsian terms, a manifest image, that orders the intuitions we have of ourselves as objects in the world, in the same way as we sort and collect impressions of any other object.<sup>8</sup>

For Adorno, the function of the artwork, and *a fortiori* of music, in a time of crisis, was critique: not to say what was wrong, but to show, by the wound inflicted on its capacity for expression, the wrongness of the times. It is sometimes argued that Adorno objected to popular music because of its character as a commodity: this misses a crucial dialectical figure in *Aesthetic Theory*. 'The absolute artwork' he states 'converges with the absolute commodity'. (AT 21). In other words, just as the artwork's extreme subjectivity points to the limits of the subject as 'ultimate' (AT 169), so the very extremity of the artwork's 'commodity being' points to the limits of the commodity fetish. The sin of the popular song lies not in its commodity character, but in its acquiescence to the exchange principle as totality.

## II

Adorno was alive to the ontological transformation of music wrought by the advent of recording. He was materialist enough to see that the social meaning of music and the 'We' that constituted its subjectivity, were not immutable. Before returning to Adorno however, I would like to look in some detail at how music as recording, and in particular, popular music, differs from scored music.

There is, by now, a quite considerable body of work (Gracyk 1999, Davies 1991 etc.) concerning the ontology of popular – and usually, more specifically, rock – music. What is generally the topic of claim and counter-claim in this work is to do with the ontology of music and whether there is a decisive difference between the way in which 'classical' music 'is' and the way in which 'rock' (or recorded) music exists.

Before going into a little more detail about some of these claims, it might be worth rehearsing some of the basic theoretical frameworks within which these views operate. The first of these is the 'type/token' distinction, generally considered to satisfactorily 'fix' the identity of a piece of 'serious' music. The 'type' of Beethoven's fifth symphony is either identical with the score, or else is an 'idea' of which the score, all its performances, and recordings, are tokens.<sup>9</sup>

The second major piece of theoretical scaffolding here is the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ontologies when it comes to music. On this reckoning, a 'thick' piece is one where, as close as possible to all the characteristics of a piece of music are determined in, usually, a score. Most works of the 'classical' tradition after about 1800 would be 'thick' in this sense; the score would outline all the events in the piece, itemise the instrumentation, and direct the conductor as to the pace and dynam-

ics of the work. Opposed to this, a work such as 'Happy Birthday' is relatively thin, since, as long as the melody and the words are present, it can be performed in an almost infinite number of ways without anyone feeling they have been defrauded of the genuine experience of the work.<sup>10</sup>

Gracyk argues that the ontology outlined above breaks down when we come to discuss rock music; he argues that 'rock' is not a genre, or at least it cannot be limited by such determinations – rather it may be understood 'ontologically' as music made to be recorded. Rock, in this sense of the term, is not to be understood as the offspring of the rhythm 'n' blues and country, assembled in studios in the south in the early fifties, and something that continues as it instantiates genre markings and song conventions that are at least distantly related to these antecedents. Rock is, rather, constructed in the recording studio, by the recording studio, and for the recording studio.

Rock is popular music of the second half of the twentieth century which is essentially dependent on recording technology for its inception and dissemination.<sup>11</sup>

This flips the platonic notion of the score – or the song – as the type of which the recording is a token or a manifestation. Instead, the recording becomes the original, and the live performance the derivative token. This, as has been subsequently argued, can be true, even of songs that have yet to be recorded, or are never recorded – because the *telos* remains the recording. Rock songs are written with the notion that they will be recorded, and live performance, even prior to that recording, is preparation for the eventual recorded incarnation.

Thus, the studio, and the act of recording, is not simply a 'recording', an act of mechanical reproduction: it becomes a creative act in itself, the production of an original that has no – or a limited – 'real' prototype. It is in this that Gracyk, and others locate the distinction between rock, in its heroic era, and jazz, blues, folk and so forth. Whereas, at least until the late fifties, the point of jazz recording was to capture, as far as possible, the excitement and invention of a live set, and the understanding of the genre among European fans, dependent on recordings seemed, even to themselves, to be deficient, with rock, the live performance could often fail to satisfactorily instantiate the inventiveness and hyper-realism – or un-realism – of the recording.

Stephen Davies has disputed Gracyk primacy of the recording and suggested that rock songs have a priority over their recorded instantiation, even as they are works for recorded performance – which he recognises can be a special kind of non-simultaneous, 'virtual' –or ideal – performance. Davies' other contribution to this debate comes in the 'thick/ thin' ontological distinction: he recognises that rock songs are 'thin', considered as compositions, but maybe be 'thick' in performance, where extremely fine distinctions of tone, inflection, dynamics and timbral qualities become defining and non-substitutable aspects of the work. Kania recasts this as follows, and somewhat departing from Davies' position:

Rock tracks are [...] studio constructions: thick works that manifest thin songs, without being performances of them.<sup>12</sup>

To summarise: 'rock' music of the recording era that we might take to begin with the development of certain kinds of recording technology – multitrack tape etc. – and, more importantly, the time, the money and the expertise to use the technology to create music that exploited fully the potential offered, was not just qualitatively different from what preceded it, but ontologically different in that it turned the relation between the 'song' considered as a written piece and the track as a performance –and an instantiation – thereof, on its head; the song now became identical with its recording, and subsequent performances were derivative of the recording, and not the song.

Secondly, the recording was 'thick' ontologically, the identity of the track manifest in fine sonic detail.

This primacy of the 'track' emerged, as noted, with development in recording technology: but it was also contemporaneous with the primacy of the LP and with the unrivalled supremacy of the analogue.

It is worth pausing to note the peculiarity of this moment, given prior and subsequent development in recording and distribution. Popular music up to the middle of the century had been disseminated through radio, live performance (and live performance on the radio) and recordings. And, until rock migrated to the album format, music had been recorded with the radio in mind – because radio sold records. The contemporaneous rise of the LP, the affordable hi-fi and FM radio inverted the relationship – the radio began to mimic the form of the ideal listening experience; which was sitting in a comfortable chair, with speakers positioned optimally to present the ‘true’ stereo image.

The point of this is not to suggest that there was a golden era of recording and that everything that has happened since has represented a falling away. What I want to suggest is more along the lines of the following – ‘analogue’ recording had a particular ontology, reinforced by social practice that was not incidental to this ontology, that brought in its wake certain commitments that have been disrupted by subsequent recording practice, listening habits, and social transformations.

To return to Adorno, I would like to concentrate on three aspects of his critique of the phonograph. The first is that recording, as with radio, alters the space of music quite dramatically: all music becomes chamber music – it is domesticated. The second is a rather subtle point – Adorno laments the pathos of earlier gramophone recordings where ‘in their earlier phases, these technologies had the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice’. What I take Adorno to mean here is that whereas early recordings, by the very distance that the technique imbued the recordings with, attested to the ‘truth’ of the performance, the ‘fidelity’ of the more modern ‘electrical’ recording techniques makes the absence of the embodied performer all the more apparent. The final point I wish to draw out from these writing is to do with the form of the record itself, something with which Adorno is fascinated:

It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing.<sup>13</sup>

It is this illegibility, and more precisely, the immutability of this script, that I want to concentrate on. This ‘script’ the form of the groove, is, once inscribed, unchangeable and is a form of ‘writing’ that is only readable by the phonographic needle. Furthermore, this script can only be written by sound, and by sound captured by quite specific practices. Adorno does briefly toy with the notion that music might be created by writing ‘directly’ onto the platter; and certainly, with the development of turntablism, we have seen some of what he had in mind instantiated in practice.

Before developing this point a little further, it’s worth noting that Adorno also recognises the way in which recording alters the temporality of music and its relation to ordinary time: instead of the unified and heightened experience of the concert, the music of the gramophone era must accommodate itself to ‘the hours of domestic existence’ to which ‘dances composed of dull repetitions are more congenial’ as ‘one can turn them off at any point’.<sup>14</sup>

Adorno was, of course, mourning the vanishing ‘aura’ of the musical work in its domestication, the way in which the two dimensions of the record (although actually it is not two dimensional, but three) sacrificed the ‘height and depth’ of the music.

What I would like to suggest here is that the illegibility and irreversibility of the ‘scribbled’ writing of the groove is the clue to survival of the aura of the musical work in era of analogue recording on tape, according to the practices outlined above as concomitant with the creation of ‘a track’ and to the authority of such works. Recording in this way, and the dissemination of such music on vinyl, no matter how protracted, or how distanced from the ideal of live recording the process is, sooner or later produces a definitive track, something that functions as the type, an ontologically thick, and more importantly, singular work, works that, once they enter their world, become fixed.

Digitally recorded and distributed music, on the other hand, is infinitely rewritable and mutable, beyond the recording event. In place of the illegible scribble in the groove of the record, we get binary code, code that, unlike the immutable analogue script, can be rewritten beyond the time of original inscription. I would argue that this represents not simply a trivial alteration in the means of

recording: it is an ontological transformation, one that critically changes the way in which we conceive of music and musical experience.

The subsequent uncoupling of the means of dissemination of recordings from, first vinyl and by now, any necessary physical incarnation has transformed the nature of recorded music: it is now ‘content’, part of a larger set of practice of cultural production, that can fill any digital space available – accommodated, *qua* Adorno, to the hours of digital existence.

### III

Robin James describes her method in *Resilience and Melancholy* as ‘both philosophy of music and philosophy *through* music’, a formulation that echoes Adorno. She continues:

The former type asks: what philosophical assumptions and ideas are embedded in musical works, performances and aesthetics? And the latter asks: how do specific pieces of music articulate, revise and critique philosophical concepts? (...) Musical works do more than just *reflect* dominant concepts, ideals and structures. They also respond to, critique, and rework them, just as any philosophical text would.<sup>15</sup>

James’ key point of departure from Adorno is connected to her historical perspective: she sees ‘neoliberalism’ – her word for the current phase of capitalism – as distinct from, and in many ways, more totalising, than Adorno’s ‘late’ capitalism. Her other key conceptual framing device is that of ‘biopolitics’: following Foucault, she considers an ‘ideology of health, vitality, and sustainable flourishing’.<sup>16</sup> While the totality that Adorno contests is predicated on atomisation and estrangement, it is, according to James’ (and others) less complete than the dispensation that has replaced it. To put it this way: while Adorno saw in the culture industry as a commodification of ‘free-time’ and the enrolment of one’s time off within the economy of work, and this is surely a model that continues, for James, the biopolitical/ neoliberal subject does not just find her time sliced up into opportunities for consumption, but is herself a commodity packaged according to a logic, not of exchange, but of competition.

James sees the key regulatory apparatus of this new dispensation as an apparent *de-regulation*: everything ‘biology, psychology, sociality, aesthetics’ works like a ‘free’ market.<sup>17</sup> This switch is accompanied by a translation from exchange- value to resilience as a measure of adaptation to the world: not, as previously, the ability to sell your labour power, but now, the ability to adopt *all* of one’s powers, faculties, and affordances to a ceaseless competition for the leveraging of minimal advantages. The distinction may be best understood as follows: where, for Adorno, leisure became consumption, to be paid for by the fruits of one’s labour, now, leisure is *production*: every click-through on social media, every pause or skip on a streaming services is an instance of value production.

What are the consequences of this for the critical capacity of music? Where once, for Adorno, it was possible for ‘the new music’ to maintain a critical relation to society and to critique, by indirection, the order of a damaged and damaging world, for James, the subsumption of everything, including the most challenging of noises within the same seamless and boundless ecology of music production, dissemination, and consumption – themselves distinctions that are losing their meaning – has eliminated any notion of an ‘outside’.

James argues that ‘intension’ has replaced ‘extension’ as the boundary of musical practice and invention.<sup>18</sup> Where once, tonal music was structured around the flirtation with dissonance and harmonic adventure, only to return to the centre, and thus affirm the regulatory power of aesthetic pleasure, understood as at least potentially and universally accessible, modern popular music imports noise into the equation and, instead of the Adornian correspondence between the whole and the part, we get an assemblage of instability, elements that collide and jar, but do so in ways that are intended to fuel resilience.

If the intensification of musical content, and its consequent instability is an index of the ideological imperative towards resilience, the means of dissemination of musical content – streaming – may be understood not just as a change in the technology of musical reproduction, but as a determinative



condition of the production of music. Two examples will help illustrate this. In a prescient article written for the *Baffler* in 2018, Liz Pelly identified what she called ‘Spotify-core’, delineating a set of practices where the platform dictated the form of composition designed, not to capture the attention so much as to avoid the skip button:

Music trends produced in the streaming era are inherently connected to attention, whether it is hard-and-fast attention grabbing hooks, pop drops and chorus-loops engineered for the pleasure centre of our brains, or music that strategically requires no attention at all – the background music, the emotional wallpaper, the chill-pop-sad-vibe playlist fodder. .... all this cater to an economy [...] where the most precious commodity is polarized human attention [...] And where success is determined, almost in advance, by data.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, ‘Spotify-core’ appeals, not because it *commands* attention, but because it can be half-attended to – or because it is inoffensive enough not to be skipped.

An even more stark illustration of the economy of inattention is provided by Vulpack’s silent album. The band, a funk-rock outfit from Ann Arbor, Michigan, were looking for a way to fund a tour. They uploaded an album called *Sleepify* to the streaming service Spotify. The album consisted of ten tracks, each 30 seconds long, and each one completely silent. Spotify will only pay a royalty if 30 seconds or more of a track is played. The band asked fans to stream it on repeat as they slept. While the revenue from each play of the album is minimal, if a fan of the band were to stream it for 8 hours, \$4.80 would accrue to the band. Over a two month period, before Spotify took it down, it earned the band something in the region of \$20,000.<sup>20</sup>

There is a more than superficial resemblance between the Vulpack work and John Cage’s 4’33". Both are limit cases, where silence is inserted into a context where music would be expected. In the case of 4’33" however, one is forced to listen to the silence, whereas with *Sleepify*, the ‘music’ is designed not only not to be listened to, but to be slept through. It is created to produce data which can then be monetised. Functionally, it is no different to any other set of tracks uploaded to a streaming service – and indeed, as we shall see, there are millions of tracks uploaded that do contain music, but that no one has ever listened to.

My argument here is that the shift from the analogue to the ‘digital’ realm of musical commodification is more than a format shift. Taylor has argued that:

We can consider music to exist in different regimes of commodification, all of which are still with us, though some are residual, some dominant, some emergent: music as published score, music as live sound at a public concert, and music as recorded in the form of player piano rolls or audio recordings in many other formats, analogue or digital.<sup>21</sup>

For Rasmus Fleischer, the shift is more fundamental:

The de-commodification of individual recordings (at the consumer side) now coincides with the re-commodification of music as experience.<sup>22</sup>

The question then becomes: what do we mean by ‘experience’?

Listening, as Nylund-Hagen argues, is no longer a distinct experiential moment, one separate from ‘ordinary’ experience: it is, instead, for the modern listener, part of the warp and weft of the normal, unremarkable everyday: what she calls ‘ubiquitous listening’:

[...] The act of listening as a simultaneous or secondary activity shaped to cope with the constant presence of music in modern life, using, for example, smartphone apps or streaming services.<sup>23</sup>

The shift to streaming as the dominant means by which recorded music is experienced has, then, three significant consequences. The first one is the dethroning of the individual ‘work’. As we saw, the advent of recording facilitated, to Adorno’s apparent dismay, the dismembering of the work and its segmentation into three minute ‘excerpts’. The recording era did, however, as we have also seen, lead to a reformulation of the work as ‘the track’, a fixed and authoritative version of a song, an

authority that relied, not on the accurate replication of a score, but on an irreducible and unreproducible timbral signature. Streaming, as the word suggests, is a continuum, a way of listening to – or at least, hearing – music that is continuous and expects seamless transitions between tracks to facilitate the construction or intensification of mood. This expectation collapses the unity and authority of the ‘track’: its timbral signature and extensive unity replaced by, as James says, intensification – an assemblage of hooks, soars, and drops, each event potentially extractable and discrete, ready to be reformatted and sampled.

More crucially, at least for my argument, streaming evacuates any critical potential that music might have. As suggested above, music, by its very oddness and, as Adorno termed it ‘enigmaticalness’, was able to point to, though not explain, the constructed-ness and contingency of all experience. It exposed the limits of our subjectivity and opened us up to the ‘is-ness’ of objects, their excess in contradistinction to our wish to dominate through rational agency. It opened up the possibility of letting things be.

Streaming, and ubiquitous listening more generally, re-places the subject at the centre of the experience of music. Music becomes an adjunct to our mood, a technology of the self, end-directed, whether that end be mood regulation, ‘wellbeing’ or simply distraction. As a consequence, the ‘occluded core of subjectivity’ discussed earlier, the intimation of the ‘X, the thing that thinks’ recedes, and ‘the subject that is not ultimate’ assumes an illusory sovereignty.

The final consequence is the what we might call ‘data – fication’ of this subject: Kant was clear that the *sensus communis* of which he spoke, was not the ‘average’ of what people think or feel, but rather a universal feeling (*allgemeine Stimme*) or more precisely, a feeling *for* universalizability: a confidence that what we feel and think must be sharable precisely because of the undetermined ‘X’ that underwrites our specificity.<sup>24</sup> We have now arrived at the inverse of that fictional, but aspirational, ‘common sense’: what we think and feel, with regard to what we listen to and watch, becomes part of a technological *sensus communis*. This version of the *sensus* is able to compare what we ‘think and feel’ to what everyone else thinks and feels, and construct a normative version of the self which it can feed back to the individuated cluster of data points that it understands as the individual through recommendation algorithms. This intensification of the specificity of individuals and of their ‘personal taste’ has the paradoxical effect of evacuating any understanding of the limits of subjectivity of which music might have provided a trace.

A last thought: the sheer quantity of available music on streaming services produces a redundancy of a different kind. There is simply too much, and the mind is defeated by the notion of all that remains unheard. Active, aesthetic attention of the kind that Adorno privileges was perhaps never entirely achievable, but at least part of its lure was the possibility of the heightened awareness that comes with the new, with music that extends our sense of what it can do, or be. Somewhere, perhaps, in Spotify’s near infinite reservoir of ‘content’, there might be something transformational – but we will never hear it.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hanslick (1986), p. 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Adorno (1997), p. 266. (hereafter AT in text).
- <sup>3</sup> DeNora (2000).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, DeNora (2014) and many more.
- <sup>5</sup> See Fisher (2011) for more on this.
- <sup>6</sup> Kant (1987), pp. 87–90 ( 5:238– 240 in *Akademie* pagination).
- <sup>7</sup> Kant (1929), p. 169 (B159 in *Akademie* Pagination).
- <sup>8</sup> Mattin (2021).
- <sup>9</sup> For a useful summary of an extensive literature, see Dodds and Letts (2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Davies (2020).
- <sup>11</sup> Gracyk (1999), p. 56.
- <sup>12</sup> Kania (2006).
- <sup>13</sup> Adorno (1990), p. 52.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 49.
- <sup>15</sup> James (2014), pp. 21–22.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 9.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp. 26 et passim.
- <sup>19</sup> Pelly (2018).
- <sup>20</sup> McIntyre (2014).
- <sup>21</sup> Taylor (2016), p. 21.
- <sup>22</sup> Fleischer (2017), p. 156.
- <sup>23</sup> Nylund Hagen (2016), p. 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Kant (1987), p. 57 (5: 213–14).

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# Music as Gestural Language: Music and Speech in the French Enlightenment

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TIMO KAITARO and ASSI KARTTUNEN

**Abstract:** It is easy to refute the notion that music conveys meanings by pointing out how arbitrary it would be to attribute context-independent conceptual meanings to musical elements. For us modern listeners who are used to listening absolute or pure music this all makes perfect sense. However, we should not forget that music was in earlier periods thought to convey meanings which were not conceptual, but more like the gestural meanings involved in speech intonation, gestures and dance. It is this earlier rhetorical tradition with its corresponding performance tradition we must also take into consideration when we judge whether there are meanings in music or not.

**Keywords:** Musical aesthetics, musical rhetoric, Condillac, Diderot, Rousseau

Today we posthanslickians tend to think music as pure and absolute. If music is supposed to communicate meanings at all, they are musical meanings. Thus, we have sometimes difficulties in understanding how and why music was connected with rhetoric during earlier periods. However, for the French philosophers of the Enlightenment such as Condillac, Diderot and Rousseau, there was no need to connect music artificially with meanings in the manner of nineteenth-century program music. They thought that music and speech were intrinsically and historically connected through intonation and gesturality to begin with. In order to understand the aesthetics of eighteenth-century music and of earlier music in general, it may be worthwhile to see how these philosophers discussed the nature of the meanings expressed and expressible in music and how musicians of the period implemented corresponding ideas in music.

## The Common Gestural Origins of Speech and Music

In his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746) Condillac traces the origin of spoken language to gestures. This original gestural language had in turn developed from spontaneous natural gestures. Condillac considered that when humans started to use spontaneous natural gestures, such as reaching for an object, on purpose and in order to communicate with their fellow being, these natural signs were transformed into artificial signs (Condillac, *Essai*, II, I, I, §§ 1–5 and II, I, II, § 13). Finally, one has added vocal signs to this artificial gestural language (*Essai*, II, I, I, § 6). Spoken language was in the beginning used in combination with gestural language, but when its expressive powers reached a certain stage, vocal language prevailed over its gestural counterpart (*Essai*, I, I, I, § 8). However, this spoken language conserved something of the character of gestural language as vigorous bodily moments of gestural language were replaced melodic intonation, in which the intonation rose and descended in sensible intervals. So, for example, the vocable *Ah* could express admiration or surprise, pain, pleasure, sadness, joy, fear, disgust and practically any sentiment depending on its intonation (*Essai*, II, I, II, § 13).

Condillac concluded that in earlier times spoken language and singing have been rather close and inflections in speech have been so distinct that a musician could have notated them (*Essai*, II, I, II, §§ 13–14). In the origins speech was also chantlike by the fact that the syllables were not even, but some of them were pronounced fast one after the other and some extremely slowly (*Essai*, II, I, II, § 25). Condillac also observes that one could have used the same word for distinct ideas depending on its melodic intonation, which he believed to be the still the case in Chinese. He also claimed that the prosody of the antient Greeks was songlike (*Essai*, II, I, II, § 15). He finds evidence for the closeness of declamation to singing in the practices of ancient Greeks and Romans. He observes that they notated their declamation and accompanied it with instruments (*Essai*, II, I, III, §§ 15–16).

Music was, according to Condillac, for a long time merely a means to make speech more vigorous and agreeable. However, when it had perfected itself to rival with the expressiveness of speech, it was possible to separate it from speech (*Essai*, I, I, V–VI, §§ 46–47). In a similar manner the art of dance developed from the language of gestures (*Essai*, II, I, I, § 11). In this manner speech, music and dance had all developed and separated themselves from the original protolanguage incorporating them all.

### Gestures as Embodied Signs

Condillac thought that natural signs are dependent on bodily structure. According to Condillac the language of animals is limited to natural gestures and cries that organisms with a similar bodily structure can understand, but those of a different species and with a different kind of anatomical structure cannot (Condillac, *Traité des animaux*, II, ii; OP 1, 360–362). Such gestures, although learned, are, however, not conventional. They are natural, in the sense of the word ‘natural’ contrasting with conventional, artificial or arbitrary. Condillac observes that we have not chosen these first signs: they have been given to us by nature along with the conformation of our organs. But once nature has thus shown us the way, we can imagine new artificial signs ourselves. So, in this way we could in fact express all our thoughts by gestures as well as by words, with a gestural language consisting of natural and artificial signs (Condillac, *Grammaire*, I, i; OP 1, 429).<sup>1</sup>

Because of the gradual development of artificial signs from the natural ones, the distance between natural signs and artificial ones is not great. In a letter to Gabriel Cramer Condillac reproaches himself having mistakenly given the impression to the contrary (Condillac 1953, 86.). This close genetic relationship between natural and artificial signs and the possibility to transform one into the other does not, however, permit identifying them: what Condillac indicates here is merely that the same sign can act as a natural sign and as an artificial one. In his *Essai* he had already described how artificial language originated in “giving the natural signs the character of instituted signs,” that is, by men starting to use the spontaneous natural gestures and cries *on purpose* in order to express their sentiments. In this way natural and artificial sign were for a long time mixed together (*Essai*, II, I, ii, § 13). But this genetic connection and coexistence does not annihilate their essential difference. Once the natural sign is used as an artificial one, it is also transformed into a proper sign: the natural signs are signs only in a metaphorical sense (Condillac 1953, 85–86).<sup>2</sup>

From Condillac’s observation on the possibility of the same signs acting as natural signs pertaining to spontaneous reactions and as artificial signs used in communication, it follows that it is often possible to trace some conventional signs to their embodied origins. One could easily generalise Condillac’s example of the development of pointing from spontaneous natural gesture of reaching with one’s hand to the development of musical gestures. In this way, it would be possible to find, for example, the physiological motivations of conventional musical rhetorical figures. For example, the fast tempi expressing rage could be traced to the accelerated heartbeat of a person in rage. That unprepared dissonances can refer to unrest or anxiety is based on their analogy with the physiological tension involved in the orientation reflex evoked by surprising and unfamiliar stimuli, especially frightening ones, and so on. In this way, in Condillac’s scheme musical expression can be said to be closer to nature than spoken language, where traces of the physiological or gestural motivation of expressions are scarce.

## Rousseau

Rousseau's view of the role of musical features, that is, melodic intonation and rhythm in the development of language is similar to Condillac's. In his posthumous *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1781) Rousseau too thought that poetry, music and speech had a common origin (Rousseau 1781, ch. 12; OC 12, 474). He claims for example that originally language had few consonants, but vowels were richly and melodically accented. Rhythm was equally important. The root words were imitative or 'accents' expressing emotions. The reason for the preponderance of vowels for Rousseau was that they were in their melodically accented and rhythmical nature closer to nature than the artificial consonants, who served mainly to separate and make the pronunciation of vowels easier. Thus, Rousseau describes the nature of this original language by observing that "[i]nstead of speaking one sang". He observes that "[i]nstead of arguments, one had sentences; one persuaded without convincing; one painted without reasoning (Rousseau 1781, ch. 4; OC 12, 410–411).

According to Rousseau in the beginning there was no other music than the melody formed by the melodic accents of speech, no other measure than the one formed by their (temporal) quantities. One spoke as much by melodic intonations and rhythms as by articulated sounds. Speech and music flowed from the same source and were originally one and the same thing. A language without melodic accents, that is language formed merely by consonants and vowels could according to Rousseau express ideas but not sentiments or images. Expressing the latter requires rhythms and tones. And, like Condillac, Rousseau refers to the ancient Greeks, who possessed these elements more profusely than the language of later times (Rousseau 1781, ch. 12; OC 12, 426–478). However, the fact that music was close to the origins of language does not mean that it is all natural. Tones do not affect us merely as sensations. When they are combined to form a melody, they act also as signs and as images. From mere physical sounds they are elevated into means of artistic imitation (Rousseau 1781, ch. 13; OC 12, 492–493). As art they are essentially a form of culture, the understanding of which requires a trained ear. So, Rousseau concludes that music is a language, the understanding of which requires that one possesses a dictionary (Rousseau 1781, ch. 14; OC 12, 493–494).

And as far as harmony is concerned, it is according to Rousseau even more conventional than melody. It provides pleasure only for trained ears. Perceiving and enjoying harmony requires an extensive habituation (Rousseau 1781, ch. 14; OC 494–495). This difference between the more conventional nature of harmony in comparison to melody is also the reason why Rousseau prefers melody to harmony (Rousseau 1781, ch. 17 and 19; OC 12, 515 and 520–526). Melody, by imitating the inflections of speech, is able to express grief, pain or joy, intimidation and moaning. Rousseau observes that not only does it imitate, it speaks and is more passionate and more vigorous than speech. Harmony can contribute to this, but it can also be an obstacle by enchaining melody and replacing a passionate accent by a harmonious interval. Harmony also tends to separate the song from the words, so that the two languages enter into contradiction (Rousseau 1781, ch. 14; OC 12, 496–498).

Thus, Rousseau's preference goes, in contrast to Rameau, to melody, which he thinks is closer to nature. But closer to nature does not mean natural in so far as tones in a melody do not affect us merely as tones, but as signs of our affects or sentiments which we recognize in them. And this, Rousseau observes, is why the Caribbeans who have a similar nervous system as Europeans, are not touched by the music that touches us Europeans but experience it merely as noise. Rousseau reminds us that one must understand the language that is spoken in order to be moved by it. Like colours in a painting which can achieve their effect as signs or representations, sounds achieve their powerful effect only when they represent the affections of our soul. Rousseau sums up this by writing that it is not the ear that gives pleasure to the heart but heart that gives it to the ear (Rousseau 1781, ch. 15; OC 12, 501–505). Having compared colours and tones, Rousseau however warns against the false analogies between them. Colours are absolute and independent from each other but tones are relative. In a harmonic system, tones are nothing naturally, by their own nature: a tone is not tonic, nor dominant, nor harmonic or fundamental by itself, since all these characteristics are mere relations.

And in this sense a painter is closer to nature whereas music is more a human art (Rousseau 1781, ch. 16; OC 12, 511–513).

So, Rousseau thinks that the more musicians approach the purely physical impressions, the more they distance themselves of its origins and deprive it of its primitive energy. Leaving behind the oral melodious accents, and attaching itself to harmonic institutions music becomes noisier to the ear and less sweet for the heart: “it has ceased to speak and soon it sings no more; then all its accords and all its harmonies cease to have an effect on us.” (Rousseau 1781, ch. 17; OC 12, 515).

Rousseau analyses the development of musical systems starting from the system based on hexachords of the ancient Greeks (Rousseau, 1781, ch. 18; OC 12, 516–520). For Rousseau this development was, not surprisingly for him, not progress but degeneration. It was the triumph of harmony over melody with its attachments to the natural and delicate intonations of speech, which were replaced by the “calculus of intervals” of harmonic systems. Music cut its natural associations with speech. Melody was forgotten and the attention was turned towards the rules of harmony, with all kinds of artificial forms of polyphony and the invention of the minor mode and various dissonances. By concentrating on the physical effects of vibrations, music lost its moral effects that it was capable of producing when it was twice the voice of nature (Rousseau 1781, ch. 19; OC 12, 520–526).<sup>3</sup>

### Hieroglyphic Meanings

In his *Lettre sus les sourds et muets* (1751) Diderot describes how our originally holistic and simultaneous experiences are translated into the successive order of discourse. He describes also the “hieroglyphic” meanings transmitted by poetry and music, which are somehow able to preserve something of this holistic simultaneity.<sup>4</sup> These *hieroglyphs* enable one to express many things simultaneously. Poetic and imaginative discourse becomes a fabric of hieroglyphs piled one upon the other (Diderot AT 1, 374; DPV 4, 169). Diderot also presents an example of how this takes place in music. He makes an effort to express musically the meanings involved in a verse by Lucretius describing the last moments of a dying woman (Figure 1). Diderot uses the dissonant interval of a descending semitone for the words “I am dying” (a); the words “in my eyes the day refuses to shine” begin with a rising diminished fifth, and after a rest, continue with even a more dissonant interval, the tritone (b); the word “day” is expressed by ascending semitone (c), figuring a ray of light, the last effort of the dying; the words “refuses to (shine)” are escorted by a gradually descending notes (d), and finally she dies attended by an interval of a descending half tone (e). In addition to these correspondences with the meaning of the text Diderot takes care to add to his musical accompaniment correspondences with the rhythm of the text: when the poet expressed the dissolution of forces by the slowness of two spondees in the word *Exsolvatus*, the musician expresses this by two adjacent minims (f), the cadence on the second of these notes imitating according to Diderot aptly the movement of a fading light. After having described how a painter might have expressed the content of these verses, Diderot returns to describe how the musician could strengthen the expression of the vocal part hieroglyphically in the accompaniment. In the first measures of the bass is very gloomy resulting in a chord of major septime (g), deviating from the ordinary rules of chord progression, followed a chord with diminished fifth (h) and a series of minor sixths and thirds (k) that characterize the exhaustion of forces ending up with their extinction, all this corresponding to the words *Alto quævisit cælo lucem* (Diderot AT 1, 386–388; DPV 4, 183–187).

What characterizes Diderot’s composition and its analysis is that it not only contains musical imitations of the intonation of speech in the melody line but also harmonies whose tensions correspond to the affective meaning of the text and rhythmic features corresponding to the notions involving movement in the text. And these hieroglyphs are really presented one upon the other, simultaneously in the text, in the melody and in the harmony. In addition, one can observe that the music is not meant to transmit conceptual meanings such as death directly but by means of expressing movement or its lack by musical expressions which are associated to and/or described in terms of

movement and its extinction. In addition to these harmonic movements there are interpretations that refer to the direction of movement upwards or downwards, which have acquired 'hieroglyphic' meanings.



Figure 1. Diderot's composition to the words of Lucretius.



Figure 2. The 3rd recitative of the cantata *l'Amour piqué par une abeille* by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749).



### The Nexus of Living Meanings

In the eighteenth century not only philosophers but also musicians insisted on the relation of music to gestures and affects that they express. The gesture's ability to reveal hidden, meaningful layers was pointed out by Michel Paul Guy de Chabanon (1779). According to him there was something frightening in the gestural, because "it tells what words are not able to say". (Chabanon 1779, 89; cited in Law 2010, 241.) The danger of the gestural lies in the fact that it is often perceived corporally and even without noticing. Also, its meaningfulness may be based on its ability to convey something different or even contradictory to the other sensory impulses. In the case of the cantata *l'Amour piqué par une Abeille* (*Cantates Françaises, 1ere livre, 1710*) composed by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749) this sweet, intertextual act is a parody of a real tragedy, borrowing all its musically gestural phenomena from the tradition of the actual *tragédie lyrique* (Figure 2). Of course, the *tragédie lyrique* was also a realm of cultivated, gestural meanings. The borrowed style encompassed the whole embodied tradition on performing serious tragedy including the style of music, text, delivery, intonation, and gestures.

During the 3rd recitative of the cantata *l'Amour piqué par une abeille* the music performance becomes a nexus of living meanings. The recitative describes an act of a faked death scene on the idyllic island of Cythera. This early *emblemata amatoria* represents a myth about Amor and a honeybee. In the earlier antique version, which is written down by Theocritus in his idyll XIX (it's also attributed to Moschus and Bion) Amor tries to steal honey from a beehive and then complains about the stings to his mother Venus (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** *Dulcia quandoque amara fiere* (Sweet things sometimes become bitter), engraving from: Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata*, Paris 1583. Scholten 2005, 8.

There are many possible cultivated, gestural expressions available related to musically expressed dying. The musical-rhetorical tradition provides a full spectrum of musical options starting from different pauses, sighs and omissions to glissandos and several ways of exclamation. The recitative as such (as notation combined with the text) manifests the classical, rhetorical figures of *hyperbola*, *amplification* and *antithesis*.

The first half of the cantata is preparing the audience for a surprising shift taking place in this 3rd recitative. The Cupid (*Amor*), the son of Venus, is charmed by a rose he finds in the forests. He picks it up but at the same moment a bee hiding in a rose bites him. He cries and even claims he is going to die, maybe in order to gain pity from his mother. At the same time the poem's lyric ambience turns into a sweet comedy.



"Je me meurs!", Je succombe à ma douleur mortelle"  
 "I'm dying! I'm perishing from this lethal torment!"

In seconds this miniature *tragicommedia* inside a larger poem (cantata) is over. As a reaction to this, Amor's mother, Venus, sings comforting words and somewhat belittles the sufferings of Amor by claiming that Amor himself causes much more painful suffering.

### The Musical-rhetorical Gestures and Figures in the 3rd Recitative, *I 'Amour charmé*

An act of pretended death is highlighted by a sudden change of the key from G major to a minor in bars 4–6 and from a minor through an unprepared dissonance to e minor in bars 7–9. The e minor section is elevated rhythmically by a change of tempo *lentement* (bars 7–9). The bass line becomes very chromatic by descending at first in a minor (bars 5–6) then in e minor (bar 7) through a chain of suspensions. *Passus duriusculus* (meaning the chromatic base line proceeding in half-steps) is here used combined with a thought of death, as describing the "path" downwards to the gates of underworld, and the physical symptoms of losing one's strength and perishing. In musical-rhetorical terms this is a classical *catabasis*, but in a strange context. This kind of *stylus gravis*-citation (bars 5–6) in the middle of the most delightfully sweet cantata could maybe be taken seriously, if it was not immediately repeated in e minor (bar 7).

The repetition is over the top. The borrowed style brings classical tragedy in the middle of the cantata full of joyful, dance-like airs. Strongly chromatic scales were associated with Italian style also known for its angular melodic leaps, improvisatory ornamentation and violent, unprepared dissonances that were sometimes considered as exaggeration. For an eighteenth-century French listener this kind of chromatics was maybe a bit pretentious, and against "the truth" found in Nature, in *La Belle Nature*. The shift back to the original tempo is marked as *plus gay* (bar 9). The *lentement* section presents strongly contrasting and *hyperbole*-like *antithesis* against the surrounding texture. One could also point out the feature that these overly dramatic phrases are sung by a little, round-faced boy, Amor.

After the first chromatic bass line (bars 5–6) a pause interrupts the passage and we hear Amor himself moan: "Je me meurs" in bars 6–7. The sung interval, triton, is as such rhetorically efficient *saltus duriusculum*, but this time the bass note that is played at the same time as the word "meurs" is totally out of the key, an unprepared d sharp, for which one plays (in the basso continuo) a diminished seventh chord starting a chain of following suspensions. The unprepared dissonance interrupts the tonally flowing texture, which has here a musical-poetical meaning.

This kind of musical texture is usually more fun and convincing if the cultivated gestural expressions are carefully rooted into the performer's body. The 'cultivation' is, in other words, happening in the actual embodiment during the rehearsing period and the actual performing of the music and the text. Therefore, the difference here between the cultivated and natural gestures is partly blurred and deliberately unclear. If the gestural features of this music and poetry are performed in a way which makes it difficult to say whether the applied gestures are natural or artificial, then the music and the text start to become alive. Also, the performance becomes technically more advanced, easier to master and possibly brilliant.

One choice would be to apply many vocal techniques described by Clérambault's colleague, Michel-Pignolet de Montéclair (1667–1737) in the eighteenth-century treatise *Principes de Musique* (1736), for example *glissando*, *le son glissé*, which is a continuous slide upwards or downwards between two notes, and *le sanglot*, which is a kind of suffocated, violent inhalation or a sob, which was "almost always used on the first syllable of the word *helas!* or in the exclamations like *ah!*, *eh!* or *ô!*" (Montéclair 1736, 89). Both techniques were called ornaments in this treatise and they both are musical phenomena reminding closely to the embodied, natural gestures (Figure 4). These kinds of vocal and performative techniques were not necessarily notated in the score. Instead, they were a



integrated in the actual delivery of the music. Music is thus something more than its mere notation (the score), and when we discuss music, we need to address its actual bodily performance practice and take the musical-rhetorical performance tradition into consideration, when we judge whether there are meanings in music or not.

### Expression and Nature

From the musician's point of view the performance of music includes natural and cultivated, artificial gestural phenomena. The layers of musical-rhetorical context and artificially elaborated skills are intertwined with the natural breathing, thinking, moving, and reacting of the performer's body. A skilful performer uses the living, vital functions of the body as a part of the professional approach. However, not all the vital functions are considered eligible for the stage. The cultural context of the performance dictates what is considered interesting, natural, beautiful, or impressive.

The natural gestures as a part of a cultivated music performance were acknowledged by 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century music theorists, philosophers, and orators like Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), Bernard Lamy (1640–1715) and later by the composer and music theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau (1638–1764). For Mersenne the natural, vocal “accent”, *un accent de la voix (une inflexion ou modification)* was something in common with both human beings and animals “who cry to demonstrate their joy as well as their sadness” (Mersenne [1636] 1975, 365).<sup>7</sup> Even though Bernard Lamy differentiated natural utterances of animals like roaring lions and howling wolves from the natural cries of human beings, he maintained that there is a gestural level understandable between human beings even without the signifying, cultivated language. He uses a sigh as an example of a natural gesture shared with human beings even representing different nationalities (Lamy [1675] 1757, 13–14).

For Rameau ([1760] 1965) the first cries of a baby as different inflexions of the voice (and even without the gestural) were kind of music as such: “One may say that music, considered simply as different inflexions of the voice; not including the gesture, must have been our first language since one has finally imagined terms to express oneself. It is born with us, this language; a child gives us proves of it already in a cradle.” Apparently, Rameau maintains that musical expression does not always require masterful, technical application of the artificial, cultivated part of the rhetorical delivery. In his example, the expression is natural and understandable. (Rameau [1760], 165.) However, in his *Traité de l'harmonie* Rameau writes that a good musician should also be like an actor and a good orator:

A good musician should surrender himself to all the characters he wishes to portray. Like a skillful actor he should take the place of the events he wishes to depict, believe himself to be at the locations where the different events he wishes to depict occur, and participate in these events as do those most involved in them.<sup>8</sup> (Rameau [1722] 1971, 156.)

On the other hand, Rameau's *le corps sonore* principle (Rameau [1722] 1986, 18) seems to derive musical elements from nature in another way. *Le corps sonore* principle differs from the previous generations of the musical intervals by Gioseffo Zarlino (1558, 37), by maintaining that all the intervals are originally generated from the mere fundamental bass, which already includes other intervals in its series of overtones. Zarlino's theory was based on divisions of the octave, not on the overtones. The phenomenon of overtones was convincingly theorized and verbalized by Joseph Sauveur in 1701, and Rameau understood that this created a need for a new theory on how to generate the intervals and harmonies. Later on, in his *Génération harmonique*, Rameau ([1737], 2–9) developed his ideas on *le corps sonore* in terms of vibrating body and air.

### The Significant as Too Obvious and Banal

The signifying, cultivated meanings could be experienced as banal, if the composer had not convincingly understood the chosen poems. Composer and music theorist Bertrand “Bénigne” de

Bacilly (c. 1625–1690) seemed to be irritated by composers, who used “high notes” for the words signifying sky, stars, clouds, mountains, rocks, gods or celebrities and who used “low notes” for words like ground, sea, fountain or a valley ([1679] 1993, 121). For a performer simple word-painting and phenomena associated with the so called ‘program music’ is not necessarily a problem. Music can be childish in this sense and yet it may manage to be powerful. Interestingly, the same music as intervals and rhythmical portions can convey very different musical meanings, and composers have noticed that the same music can sometimes be used, for example, with religious or secular text. This could be explained by so called *hyperconnotative* nature of music (Born 2000, 32). According to Born (2000, 32) “it is because music lacks denotative meaning, in contrast with the visual and literary arts, that it has particular powers of connotation”. In this article, however, we add that music can simultaneously have denotative and (hyper-)connotative layers of meaning, as well. The meanings, which are involved in the diffuse gestural semiosis, exist partly in the notation, partly in the historical performance practices like the ones described in the treatises of oratory and singing, and partly in the performer’s body.

What are the hidden meanings then in this musical emblem composed by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault? The emblem could be interpreted as a gentle warning, a humoristic guideline to avoid sexual love particularly at young age. By an abrupt shift of the musical genre and narration it’s perhaps easier to make young people understand the dangers of sexual relationships. Again, the ‘little death’ experienced by the cupid could be a referring to so called *la petite mort*, which is a euphemism for orgasm. In the Galenic (Galen 129 CE – c. 200/c. 216 CE) sense to die a little also meant “a fainting fit”, losing one’s strength, or losing one’s conscience. William Shakespeare’s lines such as “I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes” from *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600, Act 5, Scene 2) and similarly “I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom” from *King Lear* (1606, Act 4, Scene 6) are referring to the same thing. In this French baroque version of the emblem the beehive is replaced by the flower, in which the bee hides. This detail gives further possibilities for a gestural delivery of the performance practice of *lamento*. The *lamento* itself can thus be made ambiguous, because the lamenting is so beautiful (aestheticized), and often described as appealing, even as erotic. What is intriguing in this cantata, is the trust on the power of enigma to describe the complex nature of love. More importantly, in the chosen details of the cantata, the textual, literary meanings are transformed in multiplex poetic and bodily processes, which are natural and artificial, too.

## Conclusions

As we have shown above, the French philosophers who wrote on the meanings in music referred the close connection between music and affective expression to the origins of language. According to Condillac, music, dance and discursive speech had all grown out of the original melodic and gestural language by differentiation. He and Rousseau thought that despite this differentiation music had preserved its original connection with the affective meanings involved in speech intonation and gestural language. Yet, as Condillac insisted, when the natural signs expressing affective meanings were used on purpose to communicate, they were transformed into an artificial and conventional language. Rousseau too maintained that music was a conventional language, the understanding of which requires a trained ear in order to understand the meaning of the signs involved. Nevertheless, despite this artificial nature of musical signs, the meanings involved in the diffuse gestural semiosis were considered to be capable of expressing the original simultaneous and holistic nature of experience, in contrast to discursive language, which is, according to Condillac and Diderot, essentially a method of analysing experience into the successive order defined by syntax (Kaitaro 2022, 100–115). So, Diderot spoke of ‘hieroglyphic’ meanings, that cannot be translated in the propositional meanings of articulated language. However, it is perhaps important to observe that since Rousseau and Diderot considered music as a language, its meanings were not merely imitations based on similarity (Dubruque 2001). The meaning of music could not thus be assimilated neither to

the mimetic model provided by painting nor to that of the conceptual meaning of discursive language. It is *sui generis*.

Downing A. Thomas has in his *Music and the origins of language: theories from the French Enlightenment* (1995, 32–33) distinguished two paradigms in music. He observes that early modern musical theory was caught between the trivium and quadrivium: between the verbal and rhetorical paradigm and the scientific and mathematical paradigm. The first paradigm resulted in the eighteenth century in the concern with “eloquence and persuasion, operation involving the indeterminate values of consensus or community rather than preconceived, determinate concepts”. The second resulted finally in non-representational aesthetics. Thomas’s observation points out an important aspect of eighteenth-century musical aesthetics which is clearly visible in the writing of Condillac, Rousseau and Diderot: if there is meaning in music it is not similar to the determinate meaning of conceptual discourse. It resembles more the indeterminate and embodied meanings involved in gestures, bodily movements or physiological-emotional reactions. It is interesting to observe that despite the fact that Rameau’s theory of harmony based on ‘*corps sonore*’ (Rameau [1722] 1986), tends more towards the second, scientific paradigm, he too speaks of expression in music. However, and not surprisingly since Rameau’s theory of harmony tries to derive harmony from nature, he tends sometimes, by insisting on the inborn nature of the language of inflexions, also to reduce the expressive features of music to nature instead of the culturally coded and artificial aspects of expression. His insistence on the make-believe “participation” in the events and characters points equally to the reliance on the natural emotional reactions instead of the kind of controlled and unemotional imitation proposed in Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le comédien*.

Our examples demonstrate the various kinds of embodied and gestural meanings the eighteenth-century theoreticians and musicians considered to be expressible music. They illustrate well the Condillacian idea, shared by Diderot and Rousseau, that musical meanings although culturally coded are closely linked to our bodily reactions and gestures, and even if we sometimes have a tendency to attribute more abstract conceptual meaning to music this can happen only through these more embodied meanings. For example, sorrow is not expressed directly but by imitating its bodily symptoms like sobbing. It also often requires the participation of the text. But as our example show it is not only text alone that bears the burden of meaning: even when it is the text that expresses emotions, affects, gestural or conceptual meanings, the musical expression can support, complement – or undermine as the case might be – these textual meanings. Added to this are the real gestures of the singer, which form an additional level on the whole formed of the text, music and acting. And as we have seen gestural meanings of music and acting and their complex relations to the text also permit the use of means analogous to the traditional rhetorical figures such as irony, *hyperbola*, *amplification* or *antithesis*. Evidently, once the rhetoric of musical gestures is established, it can be used in instrumental music too. The listener automatically understands the same musical gestures even in music without text or acting.

University of Helsinki  
Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Condillac takes care to distinguish the artificial and the arbitrary. What is artificial need not be arbitrary: artificial signs are not selected at random but with reason (loc. cit.)
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. *Essai*, I, IV, ii, §§ 23–24, and II, I, i, §§ 2–3.
- <sup>3</sup> By the expression “doublement” Rousseau refers here probably to the fact of song imitating both the intonations of voice and the passions.
- <sup>4</sup> This ability to present ideas simultaneously was also according to Condillac a characteristic of natural gestures. One can understand such gestures at first sight, although it would require a long discourse to translate them. (*Grammaire*, I, i; OP 1, p. 430). However, in a later chapter of the *Grammaire*, Condillac describes how one can begin to analyse and decompose simultaneous sensations into a succession of signs by using only gestural language. But at this point this gestural language is transforming itself into an artificial language. (*Grammaire*, I, vii; OP 1, p. 443).
- <sup>5</sup> The same fragmentation of the text and the small interrupting pauses are also heard in Claudio Monteverdi's opera *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, act 3 scene VII, in the aria *Addio, Roma!* sung by Ottavia, when she is leaving Rome forever.
- <sup>6</sup> The fragmentation of the pronounced text (*quelques monosyllables*) is also described by Diderot in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*: “But what moves us always, are the shouts, muffled words, cracked up voices, monosyllables escaping now and then, some kind of throaty murmurs, sounds uttered through the teeth.” (Diderot AT 7, 105–106; DPV 10, 106).
- <sup>7</sup> “*Or ces accents de passion sont communs aux hommes & aux animaux qui crient autrement pour monstrent leur joye que pour monstrent leur tristesse: C'est pourquoy j'ay dit de la voix ou de la parole, d'autant qu'il n'est pas nécessaire de parler pour faire des accens...*” (Mersenne [1636] 1975, 367.)
- <sup>8</sup> *Au reste, un bon Musicien doit se livrer à tous les caracteres, qu'il veut dépeindre; & comme un habile Comedien se mettre à la place de celuy qui parle; se croire être dans les lieux où ses passent les differents evenemens qu'il veut représenter, & y prendre la même part que ceux qui y sont les plus interessez; être bon déclamateur, au moins en soy-même, sentir quand la voix doit s'élever ou s'abaisser plus ou moins, pour y conformer sa Melodie, son Harmonie, sa Modulation & son mouvement.* (Rameau [1722] 1971, 143.)

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# Vibration and Lysis: On the Skin of the Loudspeaker

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PATRICK VALIQUET

**Abstract:** This article problematizes the ongoing controversy around the politics of recent ontologies of music that centre the “vibratory” and the “sonic,” and then provisionally proposes the “skin” as alternative focus for speculative ontological study, thus reframing the controversy as a question of the political orientation of “anti-literal” practice. The middle section proposes an approach extending the methodological metaphor of “lysis” as imagined by philosopher Daniel Charles as a non-representational alternative to “analysis” in the manner of his colleague Jean-François Lyotard’s experimental aesthetics. The final section hypothesizes about an application of lysis to an interpretation of the phonographic function of the loudspeaker that illustrates how reason and culture always already evade the constraints of a universalizing humanism.

*Keywords:* sound studies, music analysis, phonography, ontology, Daniel Charles

It should come as no surprise that, as the now dominant metadiscipline of “music and sound studies” struggles to stay relevant upon the latest waves of austerity sweeping anglophone universities, justifications for the enthusiastic turn to “materiality” that was widely celebrated as aurality’s inexorable destiny in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have begun to sound less and less certain (Chung 2021; Błaszczewicz 2021). Anxieties are rising around the residues of colonial ontologies that inhabit not only the abstract, cognitive, and/or linguistic “discourse” that the new materialisms set out to avoid, but also the embodied, material, situated social life of the aesthetic and cultural institutions that still bear responsibility for advancing “Western civilization.” Materialist ontologies are increasingly accused of policing reinstated boundaries of universal order by pronouncing on the “nature” of the sonic, especially in the noumenal form of the “vibratory,” and hence, conceived as a complex of forces operating independently from human culture, history, and the senses (Thompson 2017). Such ontologies have been said to enforce colonial governance, that is, not only of the qualities of particular musical objects and practices, but of the boundary that produces the very opposition between nature and culture, and by extension that between human and nonhuman as well. And yet, however terrifying colonialism’s effects have been on the Earth and its inhabitants over the past few centuries of European hegemony, its power also engenders the possibility of an “understudy” orientated toward the production of what Fred Moten calls “para-ontologies,” uprooted and scattered across the outside of white ontology’s universalizing campaigns of domination and extraction (Thompson 267–8, citing Moten 2008). Indeed, Black and feminist music scholars have shown that one can approach questions of ontology without abandoning questions of culture, class, gender, race and subjectivity (cf. Watkins and Esse 2013; Born 2018; Mathes 2022).

Most importantly, and contrary to the assumptions of the belated Kittlerians whose work dominates the self-styled “critical organology” and the recent media-philosophical turn in American music theory (Tresch and Dolan 2013; Rehding et al 2017; Chua and Rehding 2021), the “real” of para-ontological understudy need in no way remain limited to the beings of the products of applied scientific “acoustics” or its subject-articulated subdiscipline “psychoacoustics.” For Moten, what is essential to para-ontology is “a general critique of calculation” (2008, 187) borne by “fugitive

ontologies” (189) upon “the political phonochoreography of being’s words” (180). In this view, the process of decolonizing the discipline of music and sound studies begins with a recognition that the realities of its objects encompass a great many things that are neither vibratory, nor unequivocally “physical” (cf. Kim-Cohen 2009; Barrett 2016; Eidsheim 2019).

Prominent “speculative realist” Graham Harman (2022) himself has recently responded to these anti-colonial critics, accepting unreservedly their proposition that vibrational materialism cannot exhaust the ontological possibilities for the objects of sound and listening. For Harman, however, what is at stake in the controversy concerning the ontological turn’s intersection with colonialism is not any prescriptive account of music’s sonorous being, but rather the critical power of an “anti-literalism” that distinguishes speculative approaches as instruments in a struggle against the reestablishment of transcendent, universalizing hierarchies of objects, particularly the old “onto-taxonomy” of European enlightenment, which imposes an unjustifiable distinction, completely lacking in empirical support, between human thought and all other kinds of objects. For Harman, ultimately, “it is possible to [commit] to social justice without assenting to the host of philosophical rejections and dismissals” that critics of the ontological turn have claimed to derive from that commitment (2022, 197). The key ethical decision, then, lies in pursuing an ontology that is, as Iain Campbell (2020) suggests, “practical” rather than “doctrinal,” and thus also disposed to embodied, ethical, and epistemological partiality in the manners endorsed by para-ontologists like Moten and Thompson.

Crucially, there is no question here of resolving the implicit partiality: neither by simply rebalancing attention toward representations in the form of “auditory culture” and “audile technique” (cf. Kane 2015), nor by merely expanding ontology to include subjects as distinct from objects (cf. Barrett 2023; Born 2018). Brian Kane is correct to show that “sonicity” and “vibration” are irreducibly predicated upon the culture- and subjectivity-bound domain of “listening” and thus escape from the grasp of any “onto-aesthete” who claims to evade confrontation with objects’ cultural and historical contexts (Kane 2015, 13). On this basis, Kane concludes that *any* “shift toward ontology, despite... distinct ontological projects, is an attempt to outwit the so-called linguistic turn or the privileging of cognition, consciousness, anthropocentrism, phenomenology, or culture” (Kane 2014, 4). However, by taking a practical, para-ontological outlook we can immediately dissolve Kane’s starting premise. In this perspective, there can be no ontology of music at all without embracing “the relevance of research into auditory culture, audile techniques, and the technological mediation of sound”; to presume otherwise is to *completely misrepresent* “the nature of sound, the body, and media” (cf. Kane 2015, 3). The analyst’s ability to distinguish nature and culture in the abstract does not govern the potential variety of nature-culture hybrids that can exist.

Notice that Kane makes no mention of the “speculative” aspect of the ontologies he criticizes, as if he does not recognize musical reality’s freedom to be other than what normative listeners can make sense of and directly perceive. Like the logical positivists who were the targets of the linguistic turn in the first place (Rorty 1967, 12), Kane claims to have no method to understand questions of feeling, knowledge, or signification as referring to anything but a special language of transcendent human subjectivity, the existence of which is only intelligible as “other than ontology” (7). However, to distinguish non-ontological “others” in this way is to impose the very constraints that afford speculative, para-ontological practice: a universal ontology presupposes and engenders by negative reaction the very plurality it excludes. Clearly, the challenge is to explain realities that include the beings of both cultures *and* natures, and is therefore both rational *and* material.

### Whirlpool of the disjunctive bar

To assume a basic distinction between the objects inside and outside human reason is to enunciate an ontology of the frontier that keeps the two domains apart, even the vibrating surface itself, such as the *membrane* of a loudspeaker or a drum. Daniel Charles extends an apt metaphor for this approach in his 1976 article “Chair et lyse,” critiquing Jean-François Lyotard’s attempt to experimen-

tally dissect the “figure” of the signifier in *Économie libidinale* (Lyotard 1974; cf. Leipert 2013). Charles likens Lyotard’s method to the biochemical operation of “lysis”—breaking down a cell membrane in order to pass molecules through it, perhaps a disruption of the membrane using detergents or high-frequency vibrations for the extraction of molecules like DNA from inside the cell. The etymology of lysis extends back to a Greek root meaning “loosening” in the sense of “unfastening.”<sup>1</sup> In medical terminology, lysis refers to abatement of symptoms, as in the relaxation or decline after a state of “crisis,” the threshold across which disorder returns to order. In English translation, lysis is also the name of the Platonic interlocutor who learns in an eponymous dialogue to appreciate the complex practical and moral virtues of reciprocal friendship (Plato 2010). Socrates teaches Lysis that, although he is beautiful and his parents are rich, he must understand his love’s meaning as arising from the singular goodness of each participant, and not from the quality of their relation.

For Charles at this time, responding to his teachers Emmanuel Levinas and Mikel Dufrenne at Nanterre while also establishing a new experimental music department at Vincennes, the contemporary musicological situation was interesting insofar as it opened up exactly this challenge of an “an-archic” [*an-archique*] orientation toward its objects—an inquiry no longer limited to relations with musical utterances or works, but rather set free to explore the production of the musical *a priori* itself, in whatever form it may take (Charles et al 1971; cf. Levinas 1968, Dufrenne 1966). At the centre of Charles’s work was the untimely discovery that, no matter how deep one digs into the ontic beings of music in the world, one never locates a fundamental ground upon which non-music retreats to reveal actual *music* in some purified, original form: the boundaries that divide objects and subjects from their contexts are themselves always interdependent with a pre-ontological ethics of observation. We can think of the metaphor of lysis as problematizing this aporia, focusing interpretation on the very material power to separate transcendent insides from crude outsides.

The mode of presentation that flows most naturally from lysis is not esoteric but *exoteric*. The point is to escape from the modernist assumption that the “highest” aesthetic events are those which exceed the common abilities and understandings of their publics. Lysis produces knowing as a question of quantity and not of quality. Its aim is not to generate assent among a circle of experts, but to throw open the technique of aesthetic reflection across disciplines and toward new concerns. The skin’s normal function, to follow the metaphor, is to present the body as one organ with unified channels of action and intention. As Alexander Weheliye writes of Black “flesh” conceived in the feminist phenomenologies of Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, skin “rests at that precarious threshold where the person metamorphoses into the group” and thus “resists the legal idiom of personhood as property” (Weheliye 2014, 44). Lysis further evokes Black thought by problematizing the skin as a system of embodiment “cleaved by the working together of depravation and deprivation” (Weheliye 2014, 39). Law inscribes the being of the body on the skin, while lysis describes the skin as extensive becoming of the body as collective event.

To understand lysis as a “realism” is thus not to assume some Harmanian conviction about the universal nature of independent existences: on the contrary, realism here takes the form of a quasi-Lacanian doubt or anxiety about the very possibility of access to “the real,” which then becomes the foundation for an inescapable injunction to take every external detail into account. Unlike Charles’s and Lyotard’s well-meaning and far more popular musical contemporaries the “acoustic ecologists,” whose work rests upon on a binary morality distinguishing human from natural sounds, and also unlike the “acousmaticians,” who saw no relevant alternative to a relational epistemology dividing being into irreducible subjects and objects on the basis of conservative common sense—no matter what local nature-cultures they needed to erase in the process—lysis suggests a directing of attention toward the “whirlpool of the disjunctive bar itself,” the form of the impossibility of any natural separation between observers and observed.<sup>2</sup> Its compositional (or decompositional) form would have had to tend toward the situated auditory awareness of Pauline Oliveros’s “deep listening” (Oliveros 2005; cf. Thompson 2018). Lysis figures knowledge about reality as mythopoetic rather than empirical:

under lysis, the advance of science (or “music history”) abandons cumulative empirical measurement to become a question of iterative formalization and interpretation (cf. Miller 1979).

In psychoanalytic terms, then, we can think of lysis as requiring its subject to hesitate mid-way along the required course from analysand to analyst (cf. Rose 2004). Responding to Lyotard, Charles focuses on interpreting “lysis” as a methodological activity *prior to analysis*. Analysis addresses patterns in a set of data in the hope of deriving rational insights about its internal composition (cf. Rorty 1967, 12). Lysis hinders the analyst’s efforts to distinguish inside from outside, or foreground from background. It requires the observer to stop before analysis, first of all, in the sense of seeking to encapsulate the inner quality of a work or technique. In lysis, contrastingly, we artificially and arbitrarily remove the screens separating works from their “contexts,” allowing coincident patterns and pathologies to swim together in a common medium. Analysis sets out in search of special internal relations that should prove universal in a sense independent of external relations, whereas lysis sets out to understand all relations as multiversal or pluriversal, in William James’s sense—that is, prevailing differently absolutely everywhere (Charles 1978, 27; cf. Putnam 1990). As in biochemical lysis, the goal of lytic reading can either be to reorganize an object’s inside parts, or to study how inside and outside parts interact when held together. The former whole is cast in exploded, diagrammatic perspective, its relations stretched out “flat,” almost in Bruno Latour’s sense. To illustrate the operation, Charles proposes M. C. Escher’s 1961 drawing “Waterfall” (Charles 1978, 143–144). The problem that Escher presents to viewers, Charles reminds us, is not simply to break with normal order, shifting from order to disorder, or from objective to subjective order. Rather, Escher’s drawing displaces order from the imaginary space of architectural perspective *back onto the surface of the paper*, the materiality of which naturally affords depictions of all possible vanishing points and lines of flight at once: the an-archic, “real” surface makes possible a multiplication of imaginary surfaces and a break with the symbolic contract of “perspective.”<sup>3</sup>

Lytic reasoning falls short (Charles uses the expression *en deçà*) of both analysis and synthesis. If, as for Immanuel Kant, an analytic statement is meaningful by virtue of its internal referents alone, while the meaning of a synthetic statement depends upon external referents, then the meanings of lytic statements must conduct reference prior to the inside–outside distinction, in something like the dynamic, holistic field of verdicts and beliefs that Quine (1951) proposed to explain why analyticity appears to happen in spite of the empirical impossibility of internal referents in ordinary language. Lysis approaches statements at a pre-referential level where language recedes into the “visceral abstractions” of voice, gesture, and organ (Charles 1978; cf. Ngai 2015). Lysis looks, to borrow the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for “ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness,” laying affects out “beside” each other rather than erecting normative hierarchies of intensive feeling (Sedgwick 2003, 8–9). Affect is thus the distinguished object of lytic description. “Affects can be, and are,” writes Sedgwick, “attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (19). Affects are only ever attached to objects partially, however: the essence of affect lies in moving *across* mutually grasping bodies, continually translating the perspectives of one into qualities of another, and vice versa (cf. Massumi 1992, 36). Analysis and synthesis encounter affects only as states of affairs inside *or* outside, respectively, while lysis embraces affect’s relentless urge to be both at once.

Lysis therefore *is* this very experimental opening—this reorganization, to “disinteriorise and dereflexivise”—on the phenomenological body.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, lysis dispels any empiricist fantasy of direct access to material forces and flows. Break the skin and, all at once, all of the knowledges and experiences which were previously “embodied,” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, become not so much disembodied as *underembodied*. Organs, appendages, and features melt into a metaphorical puddle teeming with smaller bodies. Following Gilbert Simondon, lysis posits as its ground the “pre-originary” fields that afford the translation of the possibility of an “in itself” onto various shifting parts of objects and subjects in a particular medium (Charles 1978, 86; cf. Simondon 2005).



This is clearly a position that Charles derives from the existentialist- and process-informed phenomenological metaphysics which dominated the philosophy departments at Nanterre and the Sorbonne, where he studied and taught respectively over the course of more than a decade – a position that, in the perspective of a speculative history of lysis, both anticipates and transcends Harmanian realism.<sup>5</sup> Following work by Lyotard, a fellow student of the existentialist aesthetician Dufrenne, Charles digested the metaphysical aspirations that his teachers inherited from Bachelard and Bergson into a unique concern for the “figural” as the non-discursive aspect of the musical signifier.<sup>6</sup> In a manner not entirely unrelated to Quine’s quarrel with the logical positivists, then, Charles too hoped to move beyond the crude tangibility of things in the ordinary, practical lifeworld, toward the apparently infinite web of ethical, aesthetic, and epistemic mediation that governs the becoming of subjects and objects before any sensory experience can take place. Lysis, following Levinas and Blanchot, discloses the “nomadism” of this pre-ontological flesh (Charles 1978, 145); and thus reveals music as exteriorization of sound itself (cf. Marcelle 2010, 182). Ultimately, Charles suggests, we will never fully remove all of the layers of mediation and find the fundamental ground of signifying internality: like the proverbial nomad of Levinasian mysticism, musical insides are always hiding elsewhere.

### Topos of unsayability

What would it mean to lyse the ethico-aesthetic skins separating, for example, the vibratory function of the loudspeaker from the phonographic representation of sound? What other beings could lysis discover in defining an *anobjective* field of musical individuation that cuts across different interpretations of phonographic representation? Remember that the central promise of lysis is to trace figures of representation outside of the safety of the theatre of subjects and objects, allowing these figures to dissolve into the sociomaterial environments where sonic reference first takes shape: the place where representation recedes into affordance. Attention thus shifts from “the” “source” or “performance” and its “texts” as intensively “captured” in the sound object (cf. Katz 2011; Kane 2014)—toward “ordinary,” “everyday,” *underperformed* meanings and uses of the object’s tangible material forms—how the translation of a particular inscription into particular vibrations fits into the networks of economic, social, and technical constraints that govern individual and collective consumption and production of sound commodities, including any abstracted, absented or repressed functions and significations. Lysis redefines phonography as a use of inscriptions of acoustic vibration *not to capture but to represent music*, in virtual spaces defined by technical standards, sound engineering conventions, and the aesthetics of other media (cf. Greene and Porcello 2005). At Vincennes, Charles was particularly interested in the power of this perspective to rationalize an equal pedagogical value for, to borrow George Lewis’s (1996) terms, “afrological” approaches to phonography as well as dominant “eurological” approaches. Charles’ vocabulary gives support and perspective to comparison without arranging the two orientations as a dualism.

In *Économie libidinale*, Lyotard glibly recounts his realization, “one evening... between a piece of music by Kagel and a piece by Boulez... in the deserted urinals in the Donaueschingen Konzerthalle,” that, in fact, all of the unconnected, repressed parts of the modernist body were still present in the immediate experience of everyone in attendance: one had only to leave the room to perform the fact that nothing at all can be hidden, evacuated, or transformed, even in an institution of such high “critical” intensity, as far from “primitive” music as human beings could reasonably claim to be (Lyotard 1993, 122). When we dissect and stretch out flat the arborescent theatre of representations that audiences pay to attend even today at the Donaueschingen festival, we discover amongst its lurid folds the figure of its production as “the general metamorphosis of everything which takes place on bodies and inscribes itself into the social body, haunted by the idea of a ceaseless general metamorphosis, or of a general production without inscription, which is nothing other than the great skin” (Lyotard 1993, 123). Peel back the delicate membrane of “reproductions” of “works,” and with it all distinctions between “literate” and “oral” cultures; or rather, disclose the membrane as



that which was really at the centre of the avant-garde's attention all along. Thus philosophy can finally "liquidate" the notion of the composition as a government of relations among sounds, producers, and listeners (During 2000, 753). Under lysis, Cage's mythic moment of insight in the anechoic chamber becomes a positive account of the multiple overlapping *silences* providing substrates for both Cage's embodied auditory space and the ephemeral sequence of vibrations that Cage claims to distinguish into the sounds of two separate processes "inside" his body. The "real" event of intensified silence is functionalized on the body through a fictional transgression of the morality by which "good" insides are always absent from polite attention (cf. Lyotard 1984, 98–99).

A lysis of the function of the loudspeaker in eurological phonography draws attention from inscriptions and vibrations to the often invisible objects that transduce energy *between* inscription and vibration. In spite of the technical fact that the loudspeaker can only produce sound by transferring electromagnetic energy onto some kind of vibrating membrane, it is difficult in a eurological context to hear the loudspeaker as anything but a void from which individual listening subjects must retrieve the acousmatic sounds "of" other things. A eurological account of loudspeaker history begins naturally with the ear and thus with transparent (acousmatic) "reproducers" or "amplifiers" of putatively original musical, verbal, or environmental signals, emerging through the work of engineers preoccupied with eurocentric notions of "intelligibility" and "normal human hearing" into a pre-existing capitalist listening formation which governed both markets for and discourses about the usefulness of representations of sound as commodities (cf. Devine 2014). European modernity imposes a foundational myth of sound recording as "container" (cf. Sophia 2000) and thus as a thing that *displaces, carries, or conserves* voices and musics that also have some transcendent existence, if not as texts or performances (cf. Abbate 2004), then at least as what Langer called "forms of human feeling" (e.g. Langer 1957, 235), clearly distinct from the vibrations themselves. Hearing the sound of the loudspeaker itself, its "colour," is always a problem in this context. The only exceptions are limit cases like those featured in otherwise traditional concert works by Alvin Lucier, Gordon Monahan, and Cathy van Eck, where loudspeakers feature as instruments of diffusion, spectacle, or timbral modification.

Foregrounding the transductive membrane redirects media archaeology toward an alternative afrological context where loudspeakers bear closer kinship with drums as instruments organising human and nonhuman movements and vocalities in the folds of their vibrating skins (cf. Pacéré 1991). A membranophonic history of the loudspeaker would orient the history of phonography toward the vibratory genius of Black Atlantic sound system cultures, where recordings conventionally operate as modular parts of a public technical apparatus mediating an isochronous complex of lyrical, sonic, culinary, and choreological representations, all with relatively independent, situated social functions. Contrary to the naïve and patronizing accounts of Christopher Small (1977) and Charles Keil (1966) in popular ethnographies published just before Charles's thesis, lysis underlines the fundamental falsity of the conclusion that afrological musics are more "embodied" and thus "material" while eurological musics are more "disembodied" and thus more "rational." Since then, American scholars like Barbara Christian (1987) and her student Daphne A. Brooks (2021) have shown how especially Black women's sonic expression has been forced to evade the distinction between theory and practice in order to hide its capacity for critique. Paul Gilroy theorizes the "special power" of modern Black Atlantic sonic expression as deriving from this capacity for "double-ness," defined both in historical terms as "anti-modernity" and in spatial terms as "topos of unsayability produced from the slaves' experiences of racial terror," set apart by the community as a site of moral and poetic "battle" with the oppressor (1993, 73–74).

As Julian Henriques argues, the sound system MC's work is not primarily "intuitive," "instinctive," or "natural," as contemporary European musicians have traditionally been taught by their peers, instruments, and institutions to assume, but rather expounds a sophisticated critical challenge to imperialistic notions of control over colonized technological media and sociocultural space.<sup>7</sup> Sound

system practice communicates, for Henriques, across at least three vibratory “wavebands” at once: the *material* propagating through the air and the built environment; the *corporeal* of crew and crowd performance and experience; the *sociocultural* of collective understanding, morality, and sense-making. In cybernetic terms, the vibration of a particular gathering of bodies is the medium and “vibe” is the encoded message for trained receivers to interpret (xxxii–xxxiii; cf. Garcia 2020). The ontological thinking involved is inherently both sonic and auditory, addressing

energetic fields rather than separate static objects [...] the patterning of intensities through time, rather than the pattern of symmetries, systems and codes in space. The foundation of this auditory epistemology is the crowd’s visceral immersive experience of *sonic dominance* in the dancehall session. (xxviii)

Evidently, the difference between the matter and reason is rarely, if ever, identical to the difference between embodied and disembodied (cf. Cimini 2012). Vibration folds into the collective phronesis of sound system practice so deeply that it confounds the mistaken eurological assumption that matter can only exist on the outside of mind. The naïve search for a musical “real” that exists beyond questions of feeling and culture (cf. Kane 2015) articulates a hierarchy of relations to the skin of the loudspeaker that diffuses and undermines sonic dominance and thereby distorts the ontologies, cultures, and histories of the colonized and enslaved across European empires. As Nina Sun Eidsheim explains, building upon Piekut’s (2014) music historical translation of ANT, not only do racialized voices circulate across networks of individual listeners, singers, and speakers; they also call upon a “network 2” of infrastructural channels governing access to care, resources, and power; and a “network 3” or “phantom network” comprising the drifting, non-physical, “associative fabric of naturalized musical and cultural genealogy” that supports the ascription of racializing qualities to vocal timbre (Eidsheim 2019, 63–67). Lysis frees us from the need to reduce vocal circuits to their “relations” and thus relativizes the priority of the first network, henceforth allowing us to understand subjects and objects not as natural agents or elements, but as representations inscribed in a dominant “hieroglyphics” (Weheilye 2014) on particular folds of the material limit between two dynamic milieux (cf. Simondon 1958, 65).

Charles’s speculative ethico-aesthetics positions musical listening on the skin, and thereby both removes the barriers that protect the universal onto-taxonomy of European enlightenment from the challenge of alternate horizons, and suggests a practical model for the kind of understudy required to make sense of the resulting plurality.

Birmingham, UK

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The 2018 edition of *Le Robert* associates the endings *-lyse* and *-lytique* with scientific “dissolution” as in *électrolyse*.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from Charles 1978, 143. Schaeffer’s response to Charles’s February 1971 SFP seminar “Musique en an-archie” is apposite here: “Pour moi, il y a des relations entre quelqu’un qui perçoit et quelque chose qui lui est donné à percevoir. Et je ne peux pas sortir, quoi qu’on me dise, de la relation sujet–objet. Et tout le reste, pour moi, est du baratin.” [For me, there are relations between someone who perceives and something which is given to him to perceive. And I cannot escape, whatever I am told, from the subject–object relation. And all the rest, for me, is just hot air.] Charles et al. 1971, 95, my translation. On the intersection of nature and culture as conceived in acoustic ecology see Kelman 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Compare also Deleuze’s account of perspective and the Leibnizian subject in 1993, 19–22.

<sup>4</sup> Charles 1978, 146; Note the contrast with Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics, which places music “at the other extreme” from the embodied orientations of the painter or the writer, such that music “falls short” (*en deçà*)

of inhabiting Being (1964, 3). In this view, music is akin to science in its *dissociation* from the embodied subject. Note also how Charles's notion of lysis resolves the problem that rises to the surface of Amy Cimini's (2012, 369) reading of Merleau-Ponty, namely the residual musicological tendency to conceive analysis and embodiment as opposed and mutually exclusive.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wahl 1965; Dufrenne 1966; Levinas 1978; Zahavi 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard 1971; cf. Deleuze 2004, 214–215. On Lyotard's related engagements with analytic philosophy, see also Enaudeau and Fruteau de Laclos 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Henriques 2011, xix. On questions of racialization among the instruments of eurological music research, see Sofer 2020.

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# Musicality of Coordinated Non-representational Forms of Vitality

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JIN HYUN KIM

In line with the view of ethnomusicologist and social anthropologist John Blacking (Blacking, 1995, p. 224) that "... every known human society has what trained musicologists would recognise as 'music'" although "there are some that have no word for music or whose concept of music has a significance quite different from that generally associated with the word 'music'," cognitive musicologist Ian Cross, who is oriented at ethnomusicological research, insists on the notion of universal musicality (Cross, 2009, p. 182). On the other hand, pop music researcher Diedrich Diederichsen claims that pop music is not so much a form of music but rather a constellation of different media channels, i.e. "pictures, performances, (mostly popular) music, texts, and narrations tied into real persons" (Diederichsen, 2014, p. xi; translated by the author), social spaces and behavioral systems, of which music is only one part. Diederichsen's concept of music seems to be a narrow one that is limited to sonorous phenomena based on compositional intentions. Taking into account what Diederichsen refers to as pop music as well as non-Western musical practices including musical rituals that do not display a clear boundary between speech and music, however, allows us to critically scrutinize the narrow concept of music.

Cross conceives of music and language as complementary media for communicative interaction (Cross, 2008, 2009, 2014) and claims that musical interaction overlaps in function with the phatic speech register, suggesting that musical interaction and phatic conversation are manifestations of a superordinate domain of affiliative communicative interaction (Cross, 2022). Moreover, he argues that while musical interaction exhibits many of the attributes of affiliative interaction, in speech only one register, namely the phatic one used in "free, aimless, and social intercourse" (Malinowski 1923, cited from Coupland et al., 1992, p. 208), is affiliative (Cross, 2022, p. 3). According to social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, communicative interaction with the phatic function serves as a type of communicative exchange that is not aimed at communicating ideas but primarily establishes social relationships, such as constituting social groups, or confirms the participants' group affiliation. This kind of phatic function has been integrated into some forms of ritual communication such as *biga taloi*, a form of greeting, and *biga sopa*, a kind of indirect speech for jokes or lies, among the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea (cf. Senft, 2018). *Biga sopa* is used in everyday conversation, in small talk, when flirting, in public debates, and in songs and stories as a rhetorical device to avoid possible conflicts and to relax the atmosphere of the conversational situation. It provides a forum where breaking taboos is allowed (cf. *ibid.*) Taking into account Cross's suggestion that affiliative interaction tends to have features that he would describe as musical, such as a tendency for the behaviors of interactants to be adaptively coordinated or aligned in terms of form and timing (Cross, 2022, p. 4), the following questions could be raised concerning the present paper: Can speech that is characterized by the phatic function be described as "musical" and even as "music" in a broader sense? Can other modi of affiliative communicative interaction such as non-verbal gestural interaction then also fall into the category of music?



Another point worth noting when addressing a close relationship between music and speech is whether the idea that music, unlike language, bears no extra-musical meanings, which has been widespread in contexts of formalist aesthetics, is tenable. Concerning vocal music, some scholars assume that its extra-musical meanings lie in its verbal or textual basis and hence they focus on absolute music that does not entail any verbal components. However, it would be important to carefully discuss whether instrumental music does not bear any extra-musical meanings, examining how extra-musical meanings of music are determined and discussed. Do extra-musical meanings of music not differ from representational meanings of a sign that are often assigned to a linguistic sign? This paper first addresses those questions, focusing on the extent to which phenomena and behaviors that are described as “musical” are meaningful, and then suggests a broader concept of musicality and music.

### Does instrumental music bear no extra-musical meanings?

With the beginning of absolute music in the history of Western Art Music, extra-musical meanings of music have been contrasted with intra-musical meanings of music, with an approach to the latter being called “absolutist” (Meyer, 1956, p. 1). Music philosopher and music theorist Leonard Meyer places the former on a level of referential meanings, suggesting that “music also communicates meanings which in some way refer to the extra-musical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and characters” (ibid.). It is, however, not clear what Meyer precisely means by “reference,” since concepts and emotional states are representations whereas actions and characters could be extensions rather than representations. In his treatise *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956), Meyer discusses referential meanings only in passing and mainly focuses on his own absolutist approach to musical meaning. It is only in the last chapter of his work (ibid., p. 258ff.) that he goes into more detail about the reference to the extra-musical world, which he specifies as “connotation.” Among musical connotations, he counts culturally widespread associations such as religious belief, death, or emotional states that music refers to. Meyer does not consider the extensionality of music in this context. Only in his reference to a relationship of similarity between “musical mood gestures” and “behavioral mood gestures” can we detect a hint at an extensional meaning of music but he does not elaborate further (ibid., p. 268). So the term “reference” seems to be used by Meyer for a semantic or symbolic relation to what is not a sign itself in general, without specifying whether it is concerned with a representational or an extensional reference.

While a linguistic sign generally possesses a representational reference, and therefore both an extension and an intension (cf. Frege, 1892), the question of whether music has a representational meaning is contentious. In contexts of instrumental music, program music is often assigned extra-musical meanings. But those extra-musical meanings are extensional meanings, i.e. referential meanings, rather than representational meanings. Take for example Bedrich Smetana’s symphonic poem *The Moldau*: To our ears, some of its musical passages have a “rippling” quality. In this case, we could argue that their extension consists in the set of all events that have some property such as swirling water, which bring forth events that are rippling causally. Although musical passages do not “ripple”, they share properties with rippling events (cf. Koelsch et al., forthcoming). Such extensional meanings are also found in the first movement of Mahler’s first symphony. The two succeeding tones, a falling perfect fourth interval often associated with the cuckoo call, refer to cuckoos since cuckoo calls have a property similar to the musical property of the falling perfect fourth interval. In the course of the first movement, however, this musical element is transformed into a bass figure, which is no longer heard as a salient musical feature, i.e. as a falling perfect fourth, due to being embedded in a harmony, so that in this case it no longer has cuckoos as its extension.<sup>1</sup> This example shows that even in absolute music, musical components can partially have extensional extra-musical meanings. In his treatise *How do we hear music? Principles of musical aesthetics* [*Wie hören wir Musik? Grundlinien der Musikästhetik* (1911)], Hugo Riemann characterizes such a reference as an “objectification of a subjectified object” (Riemann 1911, p. 72; translated by the author) through which musical components “appear not as an expression of the artist’s life, but as [...] forces of nature, scenes, landscapes, etc.” (ibid., p. 71).



Regarding absolute music, the formalist position has articulated either the claim that music has no meaning at all, “only forms, regulated combinations of tones and tone rows to form” (Nägeli, 1826, p. 32; translated by the author), or that musical meaning is a “syntactically generated meaning” (Faltin, 1978, p. 20; translated by the author), which cannot be justified within the framework of a semantic theory. Musicologist Peter Faltin regards semantics as a theory of designation (*ibid.*, p. 13), within whose framework music is considered “asemantic” or “meaningless” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Therefore, he suggests studying musical meaning outside of semantic theories, since he assumes that musical meaning, which arises through the relation of musical elements to one another, is not supported semantically (*ibid.*, p. 20) but constituted by musical syntax. He regards musical syntax as “a meaning making process whose experienced products are the meanings of music” (*ibid.*, p. 25). His assumption that without musical syntax, there would only be “the chaos of an amorphous set of sounds” (*ibid.*), offers a basis for discussion. However, the question that is raised is whether there can be a unit of music whose meanings can be grasped without taking into account the relation of musical elements to one another, since musical forms that arise through the relation of musical elements to one another build musical units, and their meanings should be examined when investigating the meanings of music. Eduard Hanslick is one of the scholars who express this idea, in his seminal treatise *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution to the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music* [*Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1854)].

Hanslick’s thesis that “tonally moved forms [...] are the sole content and object of music” (Hanslick 1854, p. 32; translated by the author), explicitly states that music does not refer to the non-musical world of concepts and human desires. It is well known that for Hanslick, the seemingly emotional content of music is unrelated to musical meaning. However, what he means by “tonally moved forms” is rarely discussed. This term first emphasizes musical forms irreducible to isolated musical elements as essential units of music that are considered meaningful. Moreover, the term “tonally moved forms” establishes the importance of musical forms by highlighting that musical forms whose material consists of tones are characterized as movement: “changes in time, in force, in proportion” that refer to “the idea of the swelling, the dying, the rushing, hesitation, of the artificially convoluted, of the simply accompanying and the like” are audible (*ibid.*, p. 14). Musical forms are therefore able to “recreate the movement of a physical process according to the moments: fast, slow, strong, weak, rising, falling” (*ibid.*, p. 13). In other words: Music can depict neither abstract concepts nor emotional content, but the moments of movement of ideas, i.e. the “concepts that have come to life” (*ibid.*, p. 16) and the dynamic of a psychological process, for instance, the dynamics of feeling: “a moment of feeling” only becomes accessible through tonally moved forms (*ibid.*). However, Hanslick does not specify what exactly he means by “depicting” movement or dynamics. Since he uses the term “*darstellen*” (“depicting” in German) in relation to both emotional content and emotional dynamics, this term cannot be interpreted as “representation” as it is used within the scope of modern semantic theories, according to which the dynamics of feeling and the movement of ideas do not have any representational semantic content. In the foreword to his treatise (2nd edition), Hanslick describes only very briefly that “[a] thing ‘depicting’ [...] always [involves] the notion of two separate, distinct things, one of which only becomes explicit through a particular act related to the other” (Hanslick 1858, p. vii; translated by the author). In this respect, the otherwise very insightful idea that the movement of musical forms (which is not the partial moment of musical forms, but makes up musical forms) is related to the dynamics of feeling (the partial moment of feelings) and/or the movement of ideas (the partial moment of ideas) deserves thorough discussion.

Philosopher Susanne K. Langer elaborates upon the relationship between the inner dynamics of music and the dynamics of feeling. For Langer, art, in general, is “the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (Langer, 1953, p. 40), and “feeling” means, according to philosopher Christian Grüny’s interpretation, the “experience of what it is like to feel, experience or think something in particular, especially in terms of its temporal articulation” (Grüny, 2018, p. 27; translated by the

author). “Feeling” thus refers to the life experience accessible to phenomenal consciousness. Referring to Wolfgang Köhler’s theory of Gestalt psychology, Langer assumes that musical forms that emerge from the combination of several elements possess properties that create a semantic reference to subjective experience. Musical forms thus involve the purely structural conditions as to how they function as “symbolic forms” through which the world is grasped. However, unlike words, those elements that are combined into musical forms have no fixed meanings (cf. Langer, 1942, p. 76). On this basis, among other things, Langer distinguishes a theory of the semantics of music from a language-oriented theory of semantics.

Although Langer develops a theory of musical meaning that pertains to musical forms, her position differs from that of Hanslick since Langer argues that the semantic content of music is “symbolized” (ibid., p. 181). A musical form—melody, rhythm, etc.—is a “disciplined and articulated form” (ibid.), which Langer refers to as “a symbolic form”, and has a semantic content. For the discussion of a semantic relationship, she points to a clear distinction between denotation and connotation: She conceives of denotation as a central semantic relationship of language and describes language as “a discursive symbolic form” (cf. ibid., p. 82). However, no specific denotations can be assigned to a musical symbolic form that is non-discursive and untranslatable (ibid.). For Langer, music has a connotational relation to human experience that has formal properties such as “patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfillment, excitation, sudden change, etc.” (ibid., p. 185). So Langer advocates a purely connotative semantics of the music, whereby there is no fixed connotation, which in turn does not lead to a fixed connotative meaning of music, since it is not about a conventionalized sign (cf. ibid., p. 195). Based on a relationship of similarity between musical forms and forms of feeling or the “morphology of feeling” (ibid., p. 193), connotative meanings of music are not about specific emotional content, but about (general) forms of feeling that are grasped. As an example, Langer points out a similar morphology of some sad and some happy conditions (ibid.). However, the semantic relationships of music are determined by the fact that forms are “articulated” (ibid., p. 190). Even if “certain [non-musical] aspects of the so-called ‘inner life’—physical or mental—[possess] formal properties similar to those of music” (ibid., pp. 184f.), these forms are not present before they are articulated. In this respect, “possible articulations suggested entirely by the musical material” (ibid., p. 195) come into focus.

It becomes obvious that Langer’s conceptualization of music as a symbolic form through which forms of feeling are articulated is very similar to Hanslick’s thesis that the content of music consists in “tonally moved forms.” While Langer justifies extra-musical meanings linked to musical forms that arise through the relation of musical elements to one another, Hanslick’s focus lies on musical functional contexts although he also suggests that music is able to depict the dynamics of feeling. In order to elucidate the relationship between the tonally moved forms and the forms of feeling, however, it is not enough to only consider the intra-musical functional relationship. In the following, I will discuss the possibility of exploring this relationship, introducing the term “forms of vitality.”

### Forms of vitality

The term “vitality form,” coined by developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Daniel N. Stern, in conjunction with Susanne K. Langer’s concept of forms of feeling, among other things (Stern, 2010; Langer, 1953), is of importance for the development of a theory of meanings of musical forms. This term describes a form of behavior of a living being or of the arts consisting of movement, time, force, space, and directionality, which is constituted relationally—i.e. through interaction with the world and others (Stern, 2010, pp. 5f.). Just as Langer (1953) emphasized with her concept of forms of feeling, forms of vitality that manifest themselves in both physical actions and mental processes (ibid., p. 4) are about the way (“how”) in which inner—physical or psychological—life is shaped relationally rather than emotional content or mental concepts (“what”). Stern points out, however, that such forms of vitality can accompany categorizable emotional states and,

in this case, can contribute to understanding such emotional states of others through observable behavior that exhibits vitality forms. As a result, a representational meaning in the sense of modern theories of representational semantics could be assigned to forms of vitality that manifest in observable behavior. This is an essential aspect in which Stern's vitality form and Langer's non-discursive symbolic form both differ from and resemble each other. While both can be viewed as representational signs characterized by a dynamic form of movement, a representational reference to categorizable mental states of others does not form the basis for Langer's non-discursive symbolic form. Stern's form of vitality, on the other hand, can be an expressive sign of the emotional states of others, although the forms of vitality observable in human behavior or the arts, in which forms of feeling become accessible, do not directly express categorizable emotional states of others. Another difference is that Stern views forms of vitality as relational, i.e. emerging through interaction with others, and Langer does not highlight interactive-relational conditions for the articulation of forms symbolic of human feeling.

Observable forms of vitality, however, are not exclusively representational signs. According to Stern, there are also "content free vitality forms" (Stern, 2009, p. 315), which he also describes as "pure dynamic form(s) of vitality" (ibid., p. 314). A paradigmatic example of such vitality forms is the way in which a 2-3-month-old infant's interactive behavior relates to their caregiver's body movements and voices (cf. Stern, 1985, p. 143). The ability of mind-reading is developed in the later stages of childhood, i.e. at 7-18 months (cf. Buttelmann et al., 2009; Carruthers, 2013). Babies are therefore able to associate their forms of vitality with content-related verbal utterances and non-verbal gestures, facial expressions, etc. through interaction with the caregiver. Before this stage, the communication of infants relies on "content free" forms of vitality, which do not involve social cognition such as the so-called theory theory and simulation theory of understanding the mental states of others. These forms of vitality that I call non-representational vitality forms serve as the basis for interpersonal understanding, which could also involve representational signs at a later stage. What is constituted through infant-caregiver interaction based on non-representational vitality forms is interaffectivity (see Stern, 1985, pp. 138ff.). This dyadic affectivity, on which the development of a subjective perspective is based, can be characterized as a pre-reflective experience, which Stern termed "vitality affects" (Stern, 1985) and which have come to be known under terms like "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1996), "intuitive experience" (Petitmengin, 1999), "background feelings" (Damasio, 1999), "existential feelings" (Ratcliffe, 2008), "background bodily feelings" (Colombetti, 2011). However, the role of non-representational forms of vitality, which involve basic processes of coordination rather than higher-order processes of cognition such as social cognition, has been little discussed so far. Therefore, the forms of vitality that Stern calls "pure dynamic form(s) of vitality" will first be discussed in order to develop my own thesis that musical forms are coordinated non-representational forms of vitality.

Stern assumes that pre-reflective experience has a structured form (cf. Stern 1985, p. 7; Stern 2009, p. 309). He supports this assumption, taking the results of developmental psychological research into account (Stern, 1985, pp. 6ff.). One of the essential features of this structured form of pre-reflective experience is a Gestalt or "emergent property" (Stern, 2010, p. 5) arising from perceptions of movement, time, force, space, and directionality. Movement and its proprioceptive perception are fundamental to the basic awareness of life (cf. ibid., p. 9). pre-reflective experience does not have a static form but a moving form that has a beginning and an end and has an ascending and descending contour. Thus, movement is accompanied by the experience of time and space. When experiencing movement, force is felt because the effort associated with the movement is also experienced (cf. Stern, 2009, p. 315). In addition, movement is directed towards its goal, through which the tendency of the movement towards (non-)completion is experienced (cf. ibid., p. 316). In the course of interaction, forms of vitality can be coordinated and span all sensory modalities by adjusting to one modality of vitality forms through the other, as Stern observes in behavior in dyadic interaction

between infant and caregiver (cf. Stern 1985, pp. 140f.). For example, the infant's mimic contour corresponds to the prosodic contour of the caregiver's verbal expression in that both the infant's facial expression and the caregiver's voice exhibit the "crescendo" patterns (*ibid.*).

Stern argues that the arts exhibit forms of vitality in such a way that their dynamic characteristics "can be amplified, refined, and rehearsed repeatedly" (Stern, 2010, p. 75). He also partially discusses basic forms of musical vitality and a notation system for identifying these forms. However, some musical examples given by Stern are more about accent, volume, and tempo indications as well as notations for rhythm and tempo changes that are known as performance characteristics (*ibid.*, pp. 82f.). While Stern (1985, p. 159) considers "stylistic" and "conventionalized" dimensions of forms of vitality in relation to visual arts, he does not take into account musical forms related to musical styles and conventions. Hence, in the following, I will elaborate upon the extent to which musical forms are characterized as forms of vitality.

### **Musical forms as coordinated non-representational forms of vitality**

Musical forms are musical units that are formed through musical creative processes—be they composition, improvisation, interpretation, or ritual processes, which result in the forms of musical materials such as timbre, pitch, volume, rhythm, melody, and harmony. Examples are a call-and-response pattern in Black Atlantic Music or Balinese *kecak*, a cadence in Western tonal music, a metric-rhythmic structure, melodic structure, transformations of a motif, a timbre-related microsound structure in electroacoustic music, spectral music, and overtone singing.

Musical forms are not constituted as a succession of elements, but as a kind of Gestalt, as the whole that cannot be reduced to individual elements. This holistic or figurative property of musical forms is described as "inner dynamics" or "inner form" of music (cf. Dahlhaus, 1975; Rothfarb, 2002), which cannot be explained in terms of musical syntax (cf. Dahlhaus, 1975). An attempt to grammatically explain musical forms is based on a "static" approach to musical forms, presupposing the smallest musical constituents (Zbikowski, 2002). Understanding musical forms as inner dynamics is based on a "dynamic" approach to musical forms (*ibid.*), which is supported by music theorists whose work is characterized as (musical) "energetics" (cf. Rothfarb, 2002; Schäfke, 1934). Among Western classical music theorists, Adolph Bernhard Marx's dynamic scheme "Rest – Motion – Rest" for musical formal processes and "Rise – Intensification – Climax – Return – Rest" for processes of sonata form and Hugo Riemann's organic concept of the motif can be counted as precursors of energetic approaches. The concept of force, which was central to Ernst Kurth's view of melody as a dynamic movement (Kurth, 1917), also comes into play in Hans Mersmann's music theory in which musical forms are characterized as "organic unit[ies] of forces" (Mersmann, 1925, p. 376; translated by the author). Moreover, Arnold Schering's categories of opposites related to formal arrangements, which are of a purely elementary, tonal nature, are considered to be associated with energetics (cf. Schering, 1914) especially since directional tendencies that result dynamically from their succession are taken into account. Examples of the categories of purely elementary tonal contrasts given by Schering are: Sound – Pause; Long – Short; Fast – Slow; Crescendo – Diminuendo. Incomplete versus complete coherence (e.g. half sentence – full sentence), contrast (e.g. motif – counter-motif), repetition, imitation, and variation are examples of the opposites of formal arrangements.

A musical form that emerges through directional tendencies is characterized as a Gestalt that consists of movement, time, force, space, and directionality that progresses from a beginning to a point in time. Such a Gestalt is to be referred to as a "vitality form." A piece of music or musical ritual tends towards an end; a first phrase ending in a half cadence that feels tense is resolved through a second phrase ending in a strong cadence that gives rise to relaxation.

The structuring of musical forms requires physical effort—or its simulation when using digital musical instruments—to generate and shape sounds. Sounds used as musical material are structured in a specific way, depending on how their frequencies and intensities or their attack, decay, sustain

and release processes are distributed as well as on how microsound phenomena such as vibrato and tremolo are controlled. The structuring of musical forms based on microsounds, which can be investigated by an FFT-based spectral analysis (cf. Rapoport, 1996; Kim, 2003), proves to be a highly sophisticated and controllable process so that they can be generated repeatedly. Amplified and refined forms of vitality that can be rehearsed repeatedly emerge when structuring musical forms. Moreover, the structuring of timbre-related musical forms gives rise to a dynamic property of sounds involving tension and relaxation (cf. McAdams & Giordano, 2016).

Even while shaping larger units of musical forms, a directional tendency towards an end based on music-structural progression plays an important role. During musical shaping processes, the perception of a sound event currently generated is linked to motor schemata (Schmidt, 1975; Arbib, 1981) that underlie goal-oriented motor movements or activities. Therefore, musical shaping processes are accompanied by those of musical understanding that single out one or more of their dynamic properties through the interplay between perceptual schemata and motor schemata while perceiving generated sound events. These processes of musical understanding constitute musical forms as vitality forms. More precisely, musical forms can be characterized as coordinated forms of vitality that emerge holistically, using specific procedures including repetition, imitative variation, displacement, and fragmentary or expanding transformations of a musical unit, call and response, polyrhythms/polyrhythms, polyphony, heterophony, hocketing, or an interplay of different dimensions of musical structural features such as a timbre-related, a melodic, a rhythmic, and a stylistic-formal one. Although as discussed in the previous section, coordinated musical forms of vitality are considered non-representational, they serve as a common ground for the meanings of music. The extent to which my view that music consists in coordinated non-representational forms of vitality can comply with the fact that music bears extra-musical meanings is addressed in the following section.

### **Musical forms of vitality and extra-musical meanings**

In the section *Does instrumental music bear no extra-musical meanings?* I discussed that instrumental music can bear extra-musical meanings, showing that some musical passages, while lacking representational content, have extensions. Having proposed to view musical forms as coordinated non-representational forms of vitality in the previous section, the relationship between musical forms and the dynamics of feeling (Hanslick; Langer) could be elaborated upon as follows. As a first step, it can be postulated that the extension of musical forms that are perceived as energetically dynamic—i.e. as displaying the property of vitality or living (Stern, 2010)—and that therefore can be called musical forms of vitality (Kim, 2013, 2020) is the set of all things characterized by the property causally produced by physiological processes of vitality that support the survival of living beings and show a dynamic structure (such as the rhythm of a beating heart). As Fraisse (1982) and Todd (1994) pointed to musical correlates of body motions, musical pulse (beat) and heartbeat, as well as musical phrase and breathing, share properties. Iyer (2002) claims that music perception is connected to human motion, for instance, tempo to speed of human motion, meter to regularity of human motion, polyrhythm to coordinated contrasting human motion, loudness to degree of effort, exertion (cf. Iyer, 2002, p. 394, table 2). Moreover, vitality processes underlying the shared property of the behavior of living beings and musical forms include mental processes of vitality, specifically motivational states, which in turn are related to physiological processes of vitality. In this way, mental processes of vitality and musical forms also share their dynamic properties. Despite being causally produced by mental processes of vitality, musical forms, however, do not serve as expressive signs of the motivational states of music producers, given that motivational states are not representational states. On this basis, it can be argued that even forms of absolute music bear extensional extra-musical meanings. Unlike Hanslick and Langer, the relationship between musical forms and the dynamics of feeling is neither grounded in aesthetic formalism, nor in connotative symbolic forms, but in coordinated non-representational forms of vitality.



Although musical forms can therefore be considered as having a general extension, i.e., referent, the vitality processes that beget coordinated non-representational forms of vitality do not simply belong to the world in a way that is pre-given, irrespective of experiential forms of understanding. Musical forms cannot be perceived as energetically dynamic unless their forms of vitality are singled out through forms of understanding involving an experiential re-enactment (Vogel, 2007; Kim & Vogel, forthcoming) and interactive participation (Söffner, 2014; Kim & Vogel, forthcoming). Musical sequences, for instance, are then perceived as rhythmical forms of vitality either if their rhythmic structures are re-enacted through covert kinaesthetic imagery (Kim, 2022) or overt gestural-vocal activity (Cox, 2006) or if we interactively participate in the process of shaping rhythmical forms of vitality, e.g. through dancing and conducting. Hence, what musical forms refer to are not the things given in our reality (*realitas*) separately from the things that do within a world of musical understanding, but rather the world (*actualitas*) co-constituted while (co)shaping musical forms of vitality. This world goes beyond an intra-musical world and can therefore be characterized as an extra-musical world, yet it is not independent of musical forms that render coordinated non-representational forms of vitality during the process of musical understanding. Moreover, vitality processes that cause a property similar to the dynamic property of musical forms are not independent of context. According to a given context, identical musical sequences can be perceived as different forms of vitality, which in turn depends on the mental or physical processes of vitality involved in musical understanding. The meaning of a specific musical act may therefore be experienced differently in both intracultural and intercultural contexts (cf. Cross, 2009, p. 183) as Blacking (1995, p. 237) also described, noting that “[n]ot only can the ‘same’ patterns of sound have different meanings in different societies; they can also have different meanings within the same society because of different social contexts.” Therefore, musical forms could be understood as bearing *floating referentiality*: The same musical forms might refer to different things that share properties causally produced by culture-specific vitality processes. The term “floating referentiality”<sup>2</sup> would foreground the idea that musical forms of vitality have an extension in the world (*actualitas*) co-constituted while (co)shaping musical forms of vitality that involve experiential forms of understanding.

### **Towards a broader concept of musicality and music**

So far, the discussion has been focused on the extent to which music can bear extra-musical meanings, based on the concept of vitality forms. Inspired by Hanslick’s thesis that music is to be found in its tonally moved forms, my thesis holds that music is to be found in its coordinated non-representational forms of vitality. Those forms are however not limited to tonally moved forms since the latter excludes both sonorous forms that do not consist of pitched tones such as percussion music and noise music, nevertheless could be characterized as sonorous forms of vitality, and gestural forms that are not sonorous forms, yet, according to my aforementioned thesis, to be described as “musical.” Phenomena and behaviors that can be called music are merged into a meaningful unit, i.e. a musical form, by virtue of being related to one another as well as to the world while being experientially understood in terms of interactive participation and embodied re-enactment. Unlike Hanslick, I foreground music’s relation to the world by making clear that a non-representational relation can also be a relation to the extra-musical world. The term “floating referentiality” that I suggest highlights the idea that the world that music refers to is co-constituted while (co)shaping coordinated non-representational forms of vitality rather than given in our reality.

This discussion allows scholars to address the questions raised in the beginning of the present paper, whether speech that is characterized by the phatic function can be described as “musical” and even as “music” in a broader sense and whether other modi of affiliative communicative interaction such as non-verbal gestural interaction can then also fall into the category of music. Coordinated non-representational forms of vitality are (co)shaped during the practices of affiliative interaction consisting of sounds and/or body movements that structure shared experiences and are considered



meaningful in that act of understanding occurring in terms of interactive participation and embodied re-enactment, although they do not bear any representational semantics. I propose to describe such practices as *music in a broader sense*. Compared to Small's concept of musicking (Small, 1998), this broader concept of music also highlights a pragmatic dimension of the practices that are described as "musical," yet it includes semantic and hermeneutic dimensions although those approaches discussed in the present paper differ from traditional ones to musical semantics and hermeneutics in such a way that the meanings of music are not grounded in representational semantics, nevertheless not refused, and considered to emerge through experiential forms of understanding; this approach to musical understanding goes beyond textual hermeneutics. According to this broader concept of music, musicality might be ascribed to specific practices of speech and non-verbal gestural interaction that fulfill the aforementioned minimal conditions for (co)shaping coordinated non-representational forms of vitality. Taking into account the fact that those practices have not been usually considered as music yet, a re-thinking of the concept of music and musicality would deserve more extensive discussion.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany  
The University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Musicologist Vladimír Karbusický (Karbusický 1990, p. 12) discusses that falling perfect fourth in the introductory chapter of the volume *Sense and Meaning in Music* [Sinn und Bedeutung in der Musik (1990)] that he edited. However, he does not explicitly contextualize the semantic reference of this falling perfect fourth associated with the cuckoo call as an extensional one.
- <sup>2</sup> I suggest using this term, inspired by the term "floating intentionality" coined by Cross to point out the ambiguity of musical meanings (Cross, 2003), replacing "intentionality" with "referentiality." This is because within the scope of modern theories of representation (cf. Speaks, 2019), "intentionality" is used interchangeably with "representationality." Hence, the term "floating intentionality" could be misleading.

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# More Variation than Theme: On *Poikilia* in Musical Aesthetics from Plato to Schoenberg

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DANIEL REGNIER

Plato's banishment of the poets and certain kinds of music from his ideal city-state is notorious. Less well known is his attack on *poikilia*, which is also developed in the *Republic*. *Poikilia* means "variegated" or "multicoloured" but extends to all kinds of "variety," "diversity" or "variedness."<sup>1</sup> It is both an important and an elusive term in Ancient Greek philosophy and aesthetics. It has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. On the one hand, *poikilia* has not been carefully studied simply because it is difficult to translate. Since the term does not lend itself to one-to-one rendering into modern languages, it lurks behind the surfaces of translations. *Poikilia* can in various contexts be translated by a broad range of modern language terms such as "embroidery," "embellishment," "ornamentation," "manifold," "subtlety," "complexity," "deceit," "intricacy" and so on. Even an experienced classicist will only spot the avatars of *poikilia* in modern language translations with difficulty. On the other hand, the concept of *poikilia* has also resisted commentary because of its complex and dubious status in questions of both moral and aesthetic value. In certain periods and contexts, it had positive value. It was associated with order, craft, complexity, wondrous variety and dazzling beauty. In other contexts, however, it was associated with superficiality, vulgarity, dishonesty and trickery. In Plato *poikilia* has overwhelmingly negative connotations. Indeed, *poikilia* has for Plato the status of, as it were, a demi-concept referring to something that does not belong to the realm of form. Plato construes *poikilia* in the psychology of desire of the *Republic*. *Poikilia* appeals to the lower parts of the soul while reason strives for what is simple. Plato associates *poikilia*, the "variegated," with bad souls and, it turns out, with bad music.

Yet *poikilia* shows up – rather inconspicuously – in a later Platonic context, namely, in the work of Plotinus (204–270CE). Although he never explicitly criticizes Plato on any question, Plotinus silently breaks with him on the question of the value of *poikilia*. Plotinus generally has a positive view of the world of sense, including the value of sense-perception and the beauty of the sense world. Pressed to distinguish his thought from Gnostic Platonists who rejected the sense world as evil, Plotinus draws on Aristotle and the Stoics in his account of the sense world as well-ordered, good, and beautiful. Although Plotinus adopts the basic structures behind Plato's theory of art, he interprets them such as to arrive at certain conclusions that are contrary to Plato's. This is most obvious in his understanding of *poikilia* which takes on an overwhelmingly positive role in Plotinus' metaphysics and, if we extrapolate, in his theory of art. Where Plato advocates for an aesthetic of austerity and simplicity in the *Republic*, Plotinus develops an aesthetic that praises variety, diversity and colour.

Although *poikilia* lacks an exact equivalent in modern languages, it has much to contribute to themes that become important in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century music and music theory, namely: colour, unity and variation. In this paper I attempt to show how the notion of *poikilia* might contribute to 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions in music aesthetics. I do so by bringing the notion of *poikilia* into conversation with early twentieth century German theories of music aesthetics developed by Ernst Kurth (1886–1946), Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) and above all Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). Aspects of Kurth and Schenker's respective criteria for musical value can be seen to run

parallel to or even draw *in nocte* on the Platonic rejection of *poikilia*. Schoenberg, by contrast, makes some innovations that are best understood as positive reappraisals of *poikilia* in a musical context that was in some sense still under that influence of a broadly Platonic rejection of *poikilia*. In other words, on questions of colour and variety, Schoenberg stands in relation to his fellow theorists as Plotinus stands to Plato on *poikilia*. Where Plato thinks that variety is inimical to the unity of form, thinkers like Kurth and Schenker think that colour and variety are inimical to musical unity. Where Plotinus tries to show that form is expressed in all of the multifarious variety of the world, Schoenberg thinks that the unity of a musical work can develop in colour and continuous variation. In his notions of *Klangfarbenmelodie* and developing variation, Schoenberg employs what I call an “expansive” view of form, one which embraces the “colour and rich diversity” that Plotinus understood in the notion of *poikilia*.

I cannot argue for all of the steps in my reading of Plotinus on *poikilia* in this context. Even less can I argue for the historically distant connection between Plato’s view of “colour and variation” and a late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century musical aesthetic thought. (My view is that certain key Platonic ideas are operative in 19<sup>th</sup> century Neokantianism and were very important in all fields of German science, including music theory; the key idea here is that unity and form are seen to trump diversity and colour.) I will be content if I manage to communicate the main point of this speculative comparative argument in this study.

This paper is structured in three parts. In the first, I outline and discuss the implications of Plato’s critique of *poikilia* as it applies to music. In the second part, I compare Plato’s and Plotinus’ notions of *poikilia*, beauty and metaphysics. In the third part, I address Schoenberg’s notions of *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation as instances of music theory that can be understood in terms of the Ancient philosophical concept of *poikilia*. I suggest that Schoenberg goes beyond theories by his contemporaries Kurth and Schenker that more exclusively emphasize unity. I argue that Schoenberg’s positive valuing of colour and variety in music can fruitfully be understood as parallels to Plotinus’ positive appreciation of *poikilia*.

In this study I maintain the Greek notion of *poikilia* untranslated because 1) it cannot be reduced straightforwardly to any contemporary concept; 2) its history involves moments that are essential to its meaning and significance and 3) it can function as a kind of ‘focal’ concept around which other related concepts can be more clearly understood.

## I. Plato

In the *Republic* Plato thoroughly developed his theory that music plays a key role in maintaining the correct balance between the parts of the soul, and is thus crucial in ethics. Plato’s basic model of moral psychology asserts that of the three parts of the soul – reason, spiritedness, and appetite – it is the “highest” part, reason which ought to govern. Four basic virtues emerge in the well-functioning soul: the virtue of reason is wisdom; that of the middle part of the soul is courage; that of appetite is moderation and, finally, the virtue of the tripartite soul as a whole is justice. Plato associates certain musical modes with ethical dispositions. He suggests that some modes are suitable for dirges and lamentations, others for drinking parties, none of which are suitable for philosophers (*Rep.* 398d). It is the strong war-like modes which Plato recommends for philosophers who in the *Republic* are guardians of the city-state:

The Ionian and those Lydian modes are said to be relaxed.

Could you ever use these to make people warriors?

Never. And now all you have left is the Dorian and Phrygian modes.

I don’t know all the musical modes. Just leave me the mode that would suitably imitate the tone and rhythm of a courageous person who is active in battle or doing other violent deeds, or who is failing and facing wounds, death, or some other misfortune, and who, in all these circumstances, is fighting off his fate steadily and with self-control. (*Rep.* 399a–b)



Accordingly, Plato restricts the pitch material that may serve in the creation of melodies. Plato also recommends that music be purged of rhythmic complexity. He explicitly proscribes *poikilia* in metre:

The next topic after musical modes is the regulation of meter. We shouldn't strive to have either subtlety (*poikilous*) or great variety (*pantadapas*) in meter. Rather, we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune to his words, not his words to them. (*Rep.* 399e–400a)

Plato goes beyond pitch material and rhythm to discuss *poikilia* and how what we might call “melodic shape” has an impact on the moral character of listeners. Plato writes,

Just as embellishment (*poikilia*) in the one gives rise to licentiousness, doesn't it give rise to illness in the other? But simplicity in music and poetry makes for moderation in the soul, and in physical training it makes for bodily health. (*Rep.* 404e3)

What precisely does *poikilia* refer to in this passage? In fact, it is not clear that “embellishment” is the best translation in the passage just cited. Surely, Plato is not thinking in narrow technical musical terms.

In fact, Plato's complaints about music refer to a whole range of musical developments, including the domination of music of poetic text, the deviation of instruments from the vocal line, and variation of melodies by reproducing them with different scales, rhythmic licence, exploratory sounds and ornate melodic lines.<sup>2</sup> All of this points to the so-called “New Music” which emerges in Athens roughly around 420 BC. Plato seems to have had nothing but contempt for these new musical developments and advocated not even for a return to older Greek music, but a return to what was believed to be the 10,000 year old music of Ancient Egypt! To be sure, Plato's views of music softened with age. His objections to *poikilia* are tempered in his late work the *Laws*. But he never does arrive at a truly positive evaluation of *poikilia*.

Plato's objections to *poikilia* in music are not simply the rumblings of a conservative perturbed by changes in musical taste. His objections to variety in art are in fact rooted in his metaphysics and epistemology. The intelligible is, according to Plato, literally without colour. He writes of the realm of forms, “What is in this place is without color (*achrômatos*) and without shape (*aschêmatistos*) and without solidity (*anaphês*), a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman” (*Phaedrus* 247c6). Of course, the account of the intelligible in the divided line and the analogy of the cave of the *Republic* does suggest that the realm of forms is of overwhelming and radiant beauty. Nevertheless, Plato represents math, which he sees as a realm of abstract formal relations, as paradigmatic for the way that forms are abstract in contrast to the confusing multiplicity of physical reality.

*Poikilia* is related to the distinction Plato makes in the *Republic* between, on the one hand, “philosophers” who love the truth and, on the other, “lovers of sights and sounds” who fail to grasp or even seek out the forms which are behind sensible reality. Plato writes,

So, I draw this distinction: On the one side are those you just called lovers of sights, lovers of crafts and practical people; on the other side are those we are arguing about and whom one would alone call philosophers.

How do you mean?

The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colors, shapes and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself. (*Rep.* 476a–b)

Here it is evident that the philosopher should not be distracted by what might broadly be referred to as *poikilia*. In this context, *poikilia* does not directly corrupt the soul as Plato suggests that it does in music. Rather, it is simply distracting and superficial.

Plato's rejection of *poikilia* should be seen in the context of his more general critique of mimetic art. Plato sees representative art as an imitation of an imitation. Insofar as it leads us away from the truth and goodness of the intelligible – from the forms which are grasped by the mind – it is morally dangerous. Plato's suspicion of sense-perception reinforces this critique of mimetic art. In the



*Theaetetus* Plato reduces the Protagorean dictum that “man is the measure of all things” (152a) to the idea that ‘perception is truth’ (152c) and then conflates it with the Heraclitean doctrine that all is in flux (152e). The senses never grasp anything that is what it is. Rather, they present a pseudo-reality which is subject to no universal criteria for truth. Although Plato does not clearly establish a connection between his critique of sense-perception and his critique of the notion of *poikilia* it is clear enough that the basic epistemological and metaphysical structures behind his suspicion of both are the same.

The term *poikilia* figures at the centre of Plato’s critique of democracy. He sees it as a form of government in which individuals compete with one another to satisfy their lowest desires. For Plato democracy is only a few steps from tyranny. He writes,

You’ve perfectly described the life of a man who believes in legal equality.

I also suppose that he’s a complex man, full of all sorts of characters, fine and multicolored (*poikilos*), just like the democratic city, and that many men and women might envy his life, since it contains the most models of constitutions and ways of living.

That’s right.

Then shall we set this man beside democracy as one who is rightly called democratic? (*Rep.* 561e1–562a)

So, not only does *poikilia* threaten the unity of form, and corrupt individual souls, but it undermines the state.

I have so far sketched an unflattering picture of “Platonism.” Plato in the *Republic* seems to instrumentalize music, making it completely subservient to ethics and politics. His view of art approaching the puritanical is potentially even iconoclastic. But there is another Plato, the author of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the Plato who inspired artists of the Florentine Renaissance. This Plato sees continuity between the intelligible world (the world of forms) and the sensible – sometimes even sensuous – world. The *Symposium* is an eulogy to the power of worldly beauty to turn us towards higher goods. The *Phaedrus* praises divine madness as a state of mind of the person who is oriented towards the highest truth, goodness and beauty. Indeed, in the *Phaedrus* we encounter an evaluation of music which is at odds with the account of the *Republic*. Here Plato suggests that at some level music and philosophy aim at the same end. According to a myth that Socrates recounts, music and philosophy are partners. We read,

Everyone who loves the Muses should have heard of this. The story goes that the cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the birth of the Muses. When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of the cicadas came into being; and as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it is time for them to die. After they die, they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her. To Terpsichore they report those who have honored her by their devotion to the dance and thus make them dearer to her. To Erato, they report those who honor her by dedicating themselves to the affairs of love, and so too with the other Muses, according to the activity that honors each. And to Calliope, the oldest among them, and Urania, the next after her, who preside over the heavens and all discourse, human and divine, and sing with the sweetest voice, they report those who honor their special kind of music by leading a philosophical life. (*Phaedrus* 259b–d)

The author of the *Phaedrus* does not, unfortunately, tell us how this re-evaluation of music might impact his appreciation of *poikilia*. It is as if at some level Plato realized that all music necessarily involves *poikilia*, but did not arrive at a theoretical grasp of this insight. It is at this point that it is interesting to see how another Platonist dealt with *poikilia* in the spirit of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.

## II. Plotinus

Plotinus’ thought on art and beauty has had an important impact on the history of visual art. The Florentine Platonist Ficino served as a conduit of Platonian thought into the world of Renaissance

art. The basic notion developed at length in Plotinus *Ennead* I, 6 (1) is that art can be seen as a means of return to the intelligible world (the Platonic world of forms, the realm of truth and goodness). This contrasts with the notion developed in Plato's *Republic* that art further distances us from intelligible reality. Plotinus asserts that the true artist does not imitate sensible realities when producing art, but rather looks to the intelligible, i.e. the higher true, good, and even divine realities. In this sense the artist is like a philosopher.

It turns out that Plotinus' apology for artistic production is in fact rooted in authentically Platonic ideas. Although it is overshadowed by his polemics against mimetic art, in the *Republic* Plato himself does suggest precisely the model of art that Plotinus develops at length. Moreover, the model of the creation of the world by the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* involves exactly the structure of production that Plotinus works with. Furthermore, Plotinus was an avid reader of the *Phaedrus* and he often cites or alludes to a phrase from the dialogue which explains that the intelligible and sensible worlds are linked.<sup>3</sup> The *Phaedrus* inspired model is the basic structure which determines Plotinus' thought on *poikilia*.

If Plotinus' philosophy of art has been quite well studied, his contributions to thought on music have not. I suggest that Plotinus' philosophy of art can be better understood if we get a better grasp of how he employs the notion of *poikilia*. The role of *poikilia* in Plotinus' philosophy of art is easy to overlook, since Plotinus tends to use the term in contexts where he is dealing with metaphysics of nature and of the soul, rather than discussing art per se. However, I suggest that an analysis of *poikilia* should play a key role in understanding Plotinus' philosophy of art. The notion of *poikilia* is crucial in Plotinus' explanations of how the sense world is related to the intelligible world and for Plotinus, art is a tangible demonstration of this exact relationship. Therefore, introducing the notion of *poikilia* into explanations of Plotinus on art helps flesh out what is otherwise a rather abstract metaphysical account of the connection between art and the highest levels of reality. Furthermore, the notion of *poikilia* also provides more concrete vocabulary by which both critics and musicians might apply Plotinian insights in their work.

The term *poikilia* (and its cognates) in Plotinus generally serves to explain how the diversity or rich variety in the sensible world is grounded in the diversity and rich variety in the intelligible. It has, then, overwhelmingly positive connotations in Plotinus. Plato's concerns that rich diversity somehow leads us astray are generally absent in Plotinus. Stoic inspiration is clearly behind much of what Plotinus says about *poikilia*. Very generally, Stoics see the universe as a well-ordered whole behind the surface of which is a rational structure (*logos* "rational principle"). The optimistic cosmology of the Stoics rings through in contexts where Plotinus addresses the nature of the cosmos. He writes, "The universe is full of the richest variety (*poikilôtaton gar to pan*): all rational formative principles are present in it, and an unbounded sort of varied powers (*dunameis apeiroi kai poikilai*)" (IV 4, 36, 1 trans. Armstrong modified). Plotinus addresses *poikilia* as an object of wonder and admiration. *Poikilia* is here, and in many other passages, the source of the wonder (*thauma*) that Plato and Aristotle saw as the beginning of philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Plotinus frequently addresses questions of theodicy, i.e. of evil in the world in Stoic terms. Plotinus addresses evil in various ways, but very often he turns to a classical Stoic account, which he illustrates in the language of *poikilia*. According to the Stoic, much of what appears at first to be evil is ultimately to be understood as a part of a bigger picture. A shift in perspective is required in order to see this picture. Plotinus adopts precisely this Stoic strategy. He incites his reader to adopt a more inclusive vantage point by insisting that we pay attention to the rich diversity, *poikilia*, in the world. To be sure, Plotinus – unlike the Stoics – sees the sensible world as grounded in a higher transcendent reality, but all of the diversity of the sense world can be traced back to the intelligible world. The intelligible is not an austere realm of abstracted forms. Rather it is every bit as rich and diverse as what we encounter in this world, if not even more. Invoking art to explain the nature of the cosmos, Plotinus writes,

But are all individual things as they are by natural necessities and causal sequences, and excellently disposed in every way that can be? No, but the rational forming principle (*logos*) makes all these things

as their sovereign, and wishes them to be as they are, and makes the things which are called bad according to reason, because it does not wish that all should be good, just like a craftsman who does not make everything eyes in his picture; in the same way the formative principle did not make everything gods but some gods, some spirits (a nature of the second rank), then men and animals after them in order, not out of grudging meanness but by a reason containing all the rich variety (*poikilia*) of the intelligible world. But we are like people who know nothing about the art of painting and criticize the painter because the colours are not beautiful everywhere, though he has really distributed the appropriate colours to every place. (III 2 (47), 11, 1–16)

Elsewhere, Plotinus likens the dynamic processes of the cosmos to a dance which is richly diverse. He writes,

The heavenly circuit has nothing casual in it, but goes according to the rational principle (*logos*) of its living organism; there must therefore be a harmony of action and experience and an order which arranged things together, adapting them and bringing them into due relation with each other, so that according to every figure of the heavenly circuit there is a different disposition of the things which it governs, as if they were performing a single dance in a richly varied choreography (*poikilê chorea*). (IV 4 (28), 33, 1–7 trans. Armstrong modified)

Plotinus adopts the Stoic language of *logos* “rational principle,” in order to explain how the platonic forms are present in the physical world. In III 8 (30) *On Nature and Contemplation* Plotinus makes it clear that he does not think that the rich variety of colours and schemas in nature arises by mechanical processes, but is a manifestation of the living form in things.<sup>5</sup> He explains this idea in terms of *poikilia* in IV 3 (27), writing,

The fullness and completeness of souls is not the same for all. But if the whole structure in which they exist is complex (*poikilon*) – for every single rational principle (*logos*) is manifold and complex (*poikilon*) – if this is really so, there is a structural organization, and the realities are not completely cut off from each other, and there is nothing random among the realities (as there is not even among bodies). (IV 3 (27), 8, 16–21)

By way of the notion of *logos* (rational principle) Plotinus shows how form (*eidos*) or idea (*idea*) – conceived by some thinkers as abstracted and static – is in fact also immanent and dynamic. And the form itself, although one, is also manifold. As we saw above, Plotinus writes, “every single rational principle (*logos*) is manifold and complex (*poikilon*).” Plotinus also ultimately accepts the idea that there are forms of individuals. That is, he thinks that not only is there a form of “human” but that there is even a form of individual people like “Socrates” at the level of the intelligible.<sup>6</sup>

Plotinus’ conception of forms has implications for art, especially music. If the task of art is to imitate the intelligible such as to lead the viewer or listener to the highest levels of reality, and if this highest level of reality contains all the details of individuals, then art should seek to reflect all of the complexity of the world of form. Plotinus himself does not spell all of this out. But it certainly follows from the structure of his thought. Art then should not be reductive or restrictive, but rather should aim to reproduce the richness and variety of what is really in form. One might go so far as to assert that Plotinus’ notion of form is not “formalist.” That is, what is often dismissed as “accidental” as opposed to “essential” and what is often described as “content” as opposed to “form”, is in Plotinus’ view in fact part of the form. Indeed, in I 6 (1) *On Beauty* Plotinus argues that the theory according to which beauty can be reduced to proportion is false. Plotinus even suggests that colour is part of form (I 6 (1), 3, 19ff.).<sup>7</sup> In sum, according to Plotinus’ expansive notion of form, *poikilia*, that is, colour and rich diversity, should be understood as part of the intelligible.

### III. Schoenberg

It was common in late 19<sup>th</sup> century musical nationalisms and in early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernisms to turn to colour and variety as an antidote to the “Germanic” prioritization of form and structure. One

might point to Russian composers from Glinka through Mussorgsky to Stravinsky in this regard. French impressionists such as Debussy and Ravel who were inspired by painters clearly gave precedence to colour over form. Debussy's interest in the arabesque as a substantial element in composition also challenged notions of musical discourse which devalue the "ornamental." Czech composers from Smetana through Dvořák to Janáček are another case in point. Indeed, Janáček's deep interest in the Czech language as a source for composition can be construed as an interest in "local colour." Hungarian composers like Bartók and Kodály are also important in this context. Almost all of the aforementioned composers drew on the colourful variety of folk musics and – in a move that goes straight against the restrictions on modes in the *Republic* – sought out various scales beyond major and minor. All of these composers and movements might thus be seen to reappraise that *poikilia* which had been proscribed by Plato and were in some sense devalued by mainstream theory of European art music, beginning at least in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and rooted in Pythagorean inspired tendencies towards musical formalism which go all the way back to Antiquity.<sup>8</sup>

But the notion of *poikilia* fits particularly well with two major musical theoretical notions introduced by Schoenberg: *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation. It is not just that Schoenberg as a modernist – like many of his creative contemporaries – explicitly and even provocatively challenged established artistic norms. In many ways a rebel, Schoenberg was also a traditionalist. Much of his work as a theorist attempts to understand established musical thought and develop it further in ways that often end up contradicting the starting point. For example, Schoenberg forged his notion of "developing variation" by analysing the work of Brahms, who is often seen as the arch-conservative of late 19<sup>th</sup> century European art music. Indeed, if other musical modernists created alternatives to German music, Schoenberg was a reformer who changed things from within the German tradition. In this sense, he is perhaps something like Plotinus in relation to Plato. Schoenberg was committed to key elements in the German music and music theory tradition: organicism, formalism (of some kind), and emphasis on organized (a)tonal structures. Schoenberg's famous "emancipation of dissonance" can be understood as a way of working out ideas that were already latent in German musical thought. Schoenberg's internal reform of German musical thought runs parallel to Plotinian adjustments of Platonic notions of form. Plotinus saw beauty in variety and diversity, in *poikilia*, by applying Platonic structures in a more encompassing way than Plato did himself.<sup>9</sup> Both of these thinkers worked with what could be called "expansive" understandings of form.

While many German music theorists of the early twentieth century were preoccupied with explaining unity in music, Schoenberg was, I argue, more successful at dealing with diversity and variation than many of his contemporaries. In works of plastic art, unity is created by continuity in space. Works of literature are unified by the continuity of characters or, to follow Aristotle, by unity of action, time and place. In music, however, the problem of explaining why or how a work is one is problematic.<sup>10</sup> Much of the broad literature on musical form is in fact so many attempts to answer the question concerning how a collection of sounds over a period of time constitutes a unified whole.<sup>11</sup> Schenker's theory that behind a work of music there is an *Ursatz* ("fundamental structure") although by far the most influential, is only one such attempt.<sup>12</sup> Other thinkers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century develop approaches which Lee Rothfarb quite appropriately groups together under the label "energetics." Such approaches attribute central importance to the way that music manifests energy (often thought ultimately to be rooted in human psychology). Given the generally vitalist paradigm, one might expect such thinkers to make more room for the liveliness of variety and colour. Yet, Kurth – perhaps the most important "energetics" theorist – develops an approach which, although very compelling, is "reductive." It ends up excluding a great deal of music that deserves attention and appreciation. Kurth's analyses of Bruckner and Bach emphasize a kind of musical "will" which drives the melodic lines and shapes. Unlike Schenker's, this approach seems to put less emphasis on overall form. The energetics approach grounds the unity of a work in the unity of the energy or will of the creator of the music. Although arguably less formalist than Schenker's, this approach ultimately makes no more space for timbral colour.<sup>13</sup> Kurth explicitly rejects colour as a key component of good music.

If theorists as diverse as Schenker and Kurth fail to make adequate space for variety, colour and timbre in their accounts of music, Schoenberg is more successful because he manages to balance the demands of unity and diversity in music in a manner that is much less exclusive. Music is for Schoenberg fundamentally an idea (*Gedanke*).<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, we can legitimately call his music theory “formalist,” even “Platonic.” Music for Schoenberg appeals to what Plato would call the rational soul. It is thus clearly distinct from entertainment. It is not aimed at Plato’s “lovers of sights and sounds.” However, even the somewhat superficial label “expressionism” which is often applied to Schoenberg’s music reveals that Schoenberg is not exclusively a formalist and that he values the emotional in a way that Plato does not. What we get in Schoenberg is something closer to the Plotinian notion that all levels of experience – including the extraordinary diversity of the sense world – are ultimately connected to the highest levels of reality.

*Klangfarbenmelodie* (“Sound colour melody”)

In the *Five Orchestral Pieces* (*Fünf Orchesterstücke*) op. 16 (1909) number 3 entitled *Farben* (Colours), Schoenberg employs methods of composition that put diversity in timbre – i.e. sonic colour – at the very centre of musical importance. This approach to composition, though satisfying his own criteria for musical idea, would not satisfy those of theorists such as Schenker or Kurth. Only after the composition of op. 16 no. 3, that is, in his *Harmonielehre* (1911), did Schoenberg explicitly formulate his theory of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The term *Klangfarbenmelodie* is composed of three terms: *Klang* meaning “sound,” *Farben* means “colours” and of course *Melodie* which simply means “melody.”<sup>15</sup> So *Klangfarbenmelodie* can be translated literally as “sound colour melody.” Such a melody is constructed not by variation of pitches, but by variation in timbral colour.<sup>16</sup> Schoenberg explains,

In a musical sound (*Klang*) three characteristics are recognized: its pitch, color [timbre], and volume. [...] The evaluation of tone color (*Klangfarbe*), the second dimension of tone, is thus in a still much less cultivated, much less organized state [...]. Now, if it is possible to create patterns out of tone colors that are differentiated according to pitch, patterns we call ‘melodies’, progressions, whose coherence (*Zusammenhang*) evokes an effect analogous to thought processes, then it must also be possible to make such progressions out of the tone colors of the other dimension, out of that which we call simply ‘tone color’, progressions whose relations with one another work with a kind of logic entirely equivalent to that logic which satisfies us in the melody of pitches. (Schoenberg 1978 p. 421)

According to this passage, melodies created primarily out of tone colours do follow a logic. In fact, Schoenberg seems to be committed to the idea that music does or even *must* contain the dimension of melody. But he opens the door to melody being understood in a very broad sense. Moreover, few listeners of Schoenberg’s op. 16 no. 3 would recognize anything that corresponds to what is usually referred to as melody. Clearly Schoenberg entertains here a very expansive and inclusive notion of melody.

The music theorist Ernst Kurth insisted that melody is the most fundamental phenomenon in music. Notes are arranged in a “line” and become that through which the melody flows (Kurth, 1917 p. 14–15). For Kurth melody is, then, *strömende Kraft* (“flowing power or energy”: Kurth, 1917 p. 10). Kurth thinks rhythm and harmony derive from melody (Kurth 1917 p. 11ff.). He insists, moreover, that it is the melody as “line” that provides unity to music. The unity of this line is ultimately to be traced back to a musical energy or power and even to “will.”<sup>17</sup> But Kurth’s exclusive insistence on melodic line as the key to music is problematic since it allows little room for other musical means.

It is in any case clear that Kurth’s approach to music as melody would not work if applied to Schoenberg’s *Five Orchestral Pieces* (*Fünf Orchesterstücke*) op. 16 (1909) number 3. Although there are great differences between Heinrich Schenker and Ernst Kurth, their theories do overlap in certain ways. Since Schenker thought that what was important in music could be accounted for in the single dimension of pitch, I take it that Schenker’s *Ursatz* and *Umlinie* would be similarly embarrassed in attempts to take account of a music which makes contrasts in tonal colour the key operative



dimension.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately Schenker's approach attempts to present compositions such that they can be seen as a whole as if from some vantage point above. The essence of music is not details of ornament, colour and variation. These are not essential components of music. Kurth and Schenker work with ideas of structure, expression and form which reflect something like a narrow interpretation of Platonic notions of form. Indeed, both Kurth and Schenker might have difficulty defending themselves against accusations of the musical equivalent of "Chromaphobia."<sup>19</sup> According to the argument I develop here, Schoenberg – like Plotinus – develops a more expansive understanding of form, one which is able to do justice to a much broader range of colour and diversity while nevertheless maintaining high criteria of intelligibility and unity.

*Entwickelnde Variation* ("Developing Variation")

Schoenberg discusses the notion of developing variation in various writings, some theoretical, others pedagogical and others critical.<sup>20</sup> In one important talk (1931) Schoenberg defends his *Orchestral Variations* op. 31, by showing how it incorporates a basic procedure which Schoenberg shares with Brahms. Instead of repeating melodies exactly or in parallel, Developing Variation – "a stricter style of composition" – "demands that nothing be repeated without promoting the development of the music, and that can only happen by way of far-reaching variations".<sup>21</sup> Schoenberg contrasts this approach to composition by what he seems to take as a more facile creation of memorable melody by repetition such as one finds in Johann Strauss and even Wagner (although Schoenberg certainly admired Wagner).

Schoenberg thus eschews one of the basic means for creating musical unity: repetition. In its place he suggests that there must be continuous development. In *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form* Schoenberg provides further insight into his meaning when he makes a distinction between two methods of variation in musical composition. He writes,

One can distinguish two methods of varying a motive. With the first, the variations usually seem to have nothing more than an *ornamental* purpose; they appear in order to create variety and often disappear without a trace (seldom without the second method!).

The second method can be termed *developing variation*. The changes proceed more or less directly toward the goal of allowing new ideas to arise. (Schoenberg 1993 p. 39)

In this passage Schoenberg points out how developing variation allows new ideas to emerge. Or more modestly, it allows the idea of the work to emerge fully. There is of course some element of the organicist model of music here, i.e. the understanding of a musical work as like a biological organism which grows following an inner plan, rather than one imposed from outside. Schoenberg implies that melody that does not vary is less rich in ideas; we might even say "less intelligible," to construe the matter in Platonic terms.

In a much later essay Schoenberg applies the notion of developing variation to Bach in terms that are very close to *poikilia*: "contrasts, variety ... ever needed differentiations." He writes,

Music of the homophonic-melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme, accompanied by and based on harmony, produces material by, as I call it, developing variation. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide for fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and ever needed differentiation, on the other hand—thus elaborating the idea of the piece. ("Bach" (1950) in Schoenberg 2010 p. 397)

It is significant that a key model for developing variation, for an appropriate balance of "logic and unity on the one hand and ... expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand" is Bach. Bach's work is usually classified as "Baroque" which is associated with deep colours, intricate ornamentation, exuberant detail and so forth, all of which, needless to say, qualifies as *poikilia*.



It might be objected that what I am suggesting are deep parallels to Plotinian thought on *poikilia*, in Schoenberg's work, are merely superficial similarities arising from Schoenberg's modernist search for novelty in his artistic production. In fact, Schoenberg thinks that the variety, variegation and diversity that his composition seeks is a reflection of reality. There is some kind of metaphysics behind Schoenberg's compositional theory. To be sure, the reality that he aims to capture in his music is an inner reality. Schoenberg wrote to Busoni in terms that seem to be searching for the term *poikilia*,

This variegation, this multifariousness, this *illogicality* which our senses demonstrate, the illogicality presented by their interactions, set forth by some mounting rush of blood, by some reaction of the senses or the nerves, this I should like to have in my music. It should be an expression of feeling, as our feelings, which bring us in contact with our subconscious, really are, and no false child of feelings and 'conscious logic.' (Schoenberg to Busoni, August 1909, in Busoni 1987 p. 389)<sup>22</sup>

Lest this statement – a compressed expressionist manifesto – sound far from the Plotinian idea that it is the cosmos – both the sensible cosmos and its intelligible source – which is varied and diverse rather than some subjective realm, it is worth recalling that for Plotinus the subjective and the objective worlds are to a large extent contiguous and are always present to one another.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Schoenberg scholarship has turned to the French Philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) as a possible source for his thinking about time and development variation (Salley 2015). For Bergson was deeply influenced by Plotinus on whom he lectured on various occasions. Indeed, there can be no doubt that Bergson's approach to time was nourished by Plotinus' III 7 (26) in which Plotinus attempts to refute mechanistic notions of time in favour of time as the "life of the soul."<sup>23</sup> Plotinus not only sees intelligibility as penetrating the entire natural cosmos but also the psyche, that is, the "soul." Precisely that subjective element – even the irrational – that Schoenberg so passionately wishes to express (by means of the most demanding and often strict musical technique) is according to Plotinian thought also somehow ultimately intelligible. *Poikilia* became for Plotinus a key instrument for talking about the connection between the wondrous variety that is present in the physical and psychic worlds and the ultimate unity and intelligibility of all.

Heraclitus has been invoked in attempts to characterize Schoenberg's musical approach (Cherlin 2007 pp. 46–47). The fact that Plotinus also believes that Heraclitus' notion of continuous change is compatible with his view that the ultimate source of everything is the One or the Good is striking. He writes, "Heraclitus also knew that the One is eternal and intelligible: for bodies are always coming into being and flowing away," (V I (10), 93–5). Plotinus thus interprets Heraclitus in a Platonic manner which is nevertheless far from the Heraclitus that we find in Plato himself. The Platonic attempt to find transcendent intelligibility behind reality is combined with the universalizing Stoic movement of *oikeiosis* or "appropriation" which sees everything in the cosmos as ultimately related. This (small "c") catholicity is something that can be discerned in Schoenberg's intentions even if he does not entirely realize his "emancipatory" project in music.

## Conclusion

If it is in some sense possible to philosophize in music as a medium, then Schoenberg philosophizes in a manner which mirrors Plotinus. This is not without some historical foundation since Neoplatonism was indeed an important influence on German Idealism which was part of the "common currency" in fin-de-siècle Vienna.<sup>24</sup>

Schoenberg did at a certain point in his career take a serious interest in Jewish musical traditions and even reconceptualized his own musical identity in contrast to German musical history (Friedmann and Guest, 2021, pp. 80–84). However, as a teacher, theorist and critic of popular music, he seems generally to have entertained what might be characterized as a "euro-centric" (even "germano-centric") conception of musical value. Often the creator of a theory does not see how far reaching its implications are. Schoenberg's "emancipation of dissonance" is related to what one might argue is in

part an “emancipation of music theory.” In fact, by understanding his *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Developing Variation under the broader concept of *poikilia*, i.e. as a positive valuation of variety and diversity as a reflection of a deeper, variegated structure of reality, we are better positioned to appreciate musics which are not structured like the music of the European “common-practice” repertoire which still dominates in concert halls and in music education. One example is the way that variation takes place in the improvised musics of the Middle East. The *taqsim* (improvisation) of middle eastern musicians often eschews repetition of melodic phrases in favour of more radical variation in ways that are very reminiscent of Schoenberg’s Developing Variation. Another example is the way that Japanese Shakuhachi music works with timbre. There is certainly something akin to *Klangfarbenmelodie* here. In fact, there might even be reason to see the extension of this approach to rhythm – not in the way that “total serialism” extended the logic of 12-tone serialism to duration – but to see rhythm as “emancipated” from melody.

By pursuing expansive understandings of form, conceptions which do not suppress or sacrifice but rather promote *poikilia* “rich variety,” both Plotinus and Schoenberg open doors for creativity and even intercultural understanding in ways that other theoretical approaches do not.

St. Thomas More College  
University of Saskatchewan, Canada

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See GrandClément 2015 for a detailed investigation of *poikilia* in the context of Ancient aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> See Wallace 2009 for a detailed study of Plato on *poikilia* in music.

<sup>3</sup> *Phaedrus* 246b. See Plotinus *Enneads* II 9 (33), 18, 38–40; III 2 (47), 7, 23–28; III 4 (15), 2, 1–4; IV 3 (27), 1, 30–37; IV 3 (27), 7, 8–15; and IV 8 (6), 8, 13–23.

<sup>4</sup> See Plato *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b.

<sup>5</sup> See III 8 (30), 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Plotinus V 7 (18) *On the Question Whether there are Ideas of Particulars* and Rist 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus does, however, cite *Phaedrus* 247c6 in I 6 (1), 5 suggesting that form is colourless.

<sup>8</sup> Wagner’s ‘New German Music’ has traits that might be seen to violate Plato’s restrictions on *poikilia* (e.g. the dominance of music over text), such that one might attempt to transpose Hanslick’s formalist ideas on the musical beauty (outlined in his famous book from 1854) back into a kind musical Platonism. Then again, Nietzsche in his preference for Bizet after his break with Wagner seems to assert a colourful vitalism – some variety of *poikilia* – against what he takes to be the dreary and ultimately hypocritical music dramas of his former mentor. So, clearly *poikilia* is a flexible and in some sense relative concept, the meaning of which needs to be handled with care lest it become too hazy.

<sup>9</sup> These developments could of course be understood in Hegelian terms.

<sup>10</sup> The question of musical unity is not simply a problem for music theory or criticism. As a composer, I can attest to the fact that one of the greatest challenges particularly in longer works, consists in maintaining coherence and unity in a piece.

<sup>11</sup> See Caplin, Hapokoski and Webster 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Schenker, 1979, pp. 10–11.

<sup>13</sup> Kurth does talk about harmonies in terms of “colour” and “shading” particularly in Wagner. See Rothfarb 1991 pp. 100–109 and 123.

<sup>14</sup> See Schoenberg 1995.

<sup>15</sup> See Cramer 2002 p. 8ff for a nuanced examination of what Schoenberg means by *Klang*.

<sup>16</sup> See Schmidt 2003.

- <sup>17</sup> Kurth's debt to Schopenhauer is obvious. See Rothfarb 1991 p. 28.
- <sup>18</sup> See Morgan, 2014 p. xv on Schenker's exclusive interest in pitch.
- <sup>19</sup> See Batchelor, 2000 who discusses the rejection of colour as "other" or foreign; Something quite evident in 19<sup>th</sup> century resistance to admitting the polychromy in ancient plastic art (See also Panzanelli et al. 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> See Frisch 1984 pp. 2–15. It should be noted that the term "developing" is in the German *entwickelnde* which is not the term used to denote what in English is referred to as the "development" section in Sonata form theory. This is in German terminology the *Durchführung*.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Frisch 1984 p. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> See also Cramer 2002 p. 9.
- <sup>23</sup> See Beierwaltes 1995.
- <sup>24</sup> See Beierwaltes 2004 on the Neoplatonic sources for German Idealism. See Cook 2007 Chapter 1 on the intellectual climate of fin-de-siècle Vienna.

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# The Beauty-Utility Dialectic as Conceived in Terms of the Abject and the Sublime

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LACEY GOLASZEWSKI

**Abstract:** This article explores the perceived opposition of beauty and utility in music as traditionally regarded in Western thought. It first provides evidence of this binarism and discusses its nuanced interpretations. It then argues that the relationship between utility, the abject, and the sublime, along with the opposition between beauty and the sublime, supplies a catalyst for this perceived dichotomy. So doing, the article strives to challenge the perception of the beauty-utility dialectic and invite novel comprehensions.

**Keywords:** beauty, utility, abject, sublime, dialectic, psychoanalysis

Although the concepts of beauty and utility have long been debated in Western thought, there has nevertheless been a surprising consensus regarding the relationship between the pair in the arts, especially music. Despite possible evidence to the contrary, the two qualities have often been viewed in opposition by scholars and artists alike. Yet, in spite of this consistency, there has been little discussion as to why this dichotomy exists.

In a salutatory attempt to address this question, this article commences with an overview of traditional understandings of beauty and utility and their perceived interrelations as understood by diverse scholars and artists. Then, to underscore the beauty-utility polarity itself, the article discusses how scholarship has historically assigned value to music perceived as having no utilitarian purpose. Finally, prompted by the writings of Théophile Gautier, the article considers the relationship between utility and the abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva, and by consequence, the connection between utility and the sublime, as conceptualized by Immanuel Kant. In conclusion, the article argues that the association between utility, the abject, and the sublime, coupled with the opposition between beauty and the sublime as conceived by thinkers such as Kant, supplies a motivation for the perceived dichotomy of utility and beauty in music. By highlighting this explanation of the beauty-utility dialectic, this article seeks to pave the way for ultimately challenging the polarity itself, thus potentially undermining traditional comprehensions of utility and beauty in music and opening the door for new understanding.

## The Perceived Polarity and the Preference for the Beautiful

According to British music sociologist Tia DeNora, practical *uses* of music are functions of music beyond expressive, aesthetic purposes.<sup>1</sup> This definition is indeed vague and leaves much up to interpretation, as such uses could hypothetically include the cultural, ideological, religious, political, commercial, pedagogical, motivational, regulatory, and evaluative understandings of *use* amongst countless other options. Nevertheless, DeNora's definition is beneficial as a starting point for us, given that its ambiguity allows us the flexibility to consider multiple possibilities. Likewise, whilst beauty in music and the other arts has often been defined as a *lack* of pragmatic use, and frequently regarded in terms of form as well, as we shall see, it may, in fact, be similarly understood in a myriad

of nuanced manners. On account of these varying definitions, the differentiation between the two concepts is itself rather imprecise. Yet, in spite of the fact that the definitions of these two terms and exactly *where* to draw the line between them has often been in dispute, what has often remained consistent is the perceived opposition between the pair when discussed in tandem.

In Antiquity, for example, we see the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) as one who thus situated musical beauty and utility in opposition. In this regard, he defined the concept of the beautiful in music according to the pleasure of the physical sensations aroused by such. Hence, for Aristotle, beauty was a result of music's structure. However, this beauty could only be appreciated and enjoyed absent utility. As with the passive enjoyment of other pleasures of the bodily organs, such as the amusement provided by views and scents, the enjoyment of sounds was amongst the three manners of life elected by those who are *not* subject to *necessity*, and hence, *utility*.<sup>2</sup> Our senses, he explains, "are loved for their own sake, quite apart from their *use*."<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis added.) One can only devote oneself to the *kalon*, that is to say, to that which is beautiful, when one is freed from that which is necessary and useful. Therefore, the beautiful and the useful, in their full and complete forms, cannot coexist and were clearly in opposition for Aristotle. Moreover, it is evident that, in his interpretation, beauty was the superior of the two.

We see a similar conception of this dialectic and a resulting championing of the formal qualities of the musically beautiful over that of the useful by some ancient Greek music theorists, such as Pythagoras (570–495 BCE). However, their understanding concerning the beautiful differs somewhat from that of Aristotle. With these theorists, the formal qualities of music qualify as beautiful in their own right, and hence they remain indifferent to our reaction to them or our appreciation of them. Therefore, beautiful music is considered beautiful, regardless of how it makes us feel, *if* it makes us feel at all. This phenomenon regarding the objectivity of the beautiful in music is most especially apparent in the concept of the music of the spheres. Here, music is revered for its elegant mathematical proportions, such as in the ratios between its chosen frequencies; the harmonious proportions are viewed as beautiful on account of their perfect alignment. Whilst the concept applies to music on a cosmic scale, it can be found as well in that which is sounded and heard by us mere mortals. In late Imperial Rome, this notion of music as beautiful on account of its harmonious mathematical underpinnings was upheld by the Roman senator, consul, historian, music theorist, philosopher, and Christian martyr, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c.480–520).<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era, we witness the opposition of beauty and utility in a particularly nuanced manner with eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). For him, the beautiful concerns feelings of pleasure or pain, and, as such, it is one of three different types of satisfaction, the other two being the pleasant and the good.<sup>5</sup> Of these, the beautiful elicits disinterested satisfaction in that it is not affected by individual subjectivity; rather, beauty is a feature of the object itself, regardless of the subject that contemplates that object.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the pleasant and the good are tied to interested satisfaction and individual subjectivity; thus, they are related to the subject's experience of the object instead of the object in and of itself.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, for Kant, beauty is specifically linked to the *form* of an object, in terms of its purposiveness in itself and its lack of *external* purpose.<sup>8</sup> The pleasant, by comparison, relates to Aristotle's conception of the beautiful, in that, it, too, is a result of the physical sensations induced by an object, such as the visual or the aural, and the consequent satisfaction of the subject's desires by said object.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the good is related to purpose, including, but not limited to, outside pragmatic use.<sup>10</sup> Thus, exterior functional utility, which *could* be considered good, and hence which requires interest, is again opposed to beauty, which requires *disinterest*.

Drawing upon the writings of Kant, we have the eighteenth-century German poet, playwright, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). Schiller *vehemently* opposed beauty and utility, and of the two qualities, he, like Aristotle, favored beauty. Demonstrating his espousal of this polarity and his preference for beauty, Schiller praised beauty as necessary for political freedom and lamented its



supposed demise at the expansion of science, and hence reason, in the Age of Enlightenment. Thus, he viewed art as a victim of science and its corresponding utility. As evidence, he sadly and indignantly proclaimed that, “[u]tility is the great idol of the age, to which all powers are in thrall and all talent must pay homage[.]” a sentiment that many might claim as true in our own era.<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Perhaps the most notorious and polemical example of the perceived beauty-utility dialectic is found in an often-quoted statement offered by nineteenth century French Romantic poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist, and critic, Théophile Gautier (1811–1872). Gautier asserts that, “[t]he only truly beautiful is that which serves nothing; everything that is useful is ugly, because it expresses some need, and those of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor and infirm nature. – The most useful place in a house is the toilet.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Gautier, like Aristotle, explicitly defines beauty as the complete lack of utility. However, unlike Aristotle, Gautier seems unconcerned with the *effects* of the beautiful on us. Rather, in this regard, his position appears to more closely align with the ancient Greek music theorists and Kant, who believed in the beauty of music regardless of its effect. Nevertheless, Gautier still places in opposition the two qualities, and, for him, the pair cannot possibly coexist in their full essence in a single item. Moreover, for Gautier, as with Aristotle and Schiller, the quality of the beautiful is self-evidently far superior to that of the useful. Nineteenth century French symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), who dedicated his celebrated anthology of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), to Gautier, purported to maintain a similar view, in which the beautiful is equated with the useless, notwithstanding its effects. Likewise, nineteenth century French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) expressed a parallel sentiment writing that, “[t]hat which seems beautiful to me, that which I wish to make, is a book about nothing, a book without outside attachment[.]”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Flaubert, too, equates beauty with a lack of external function.

We observe a slightly different interpretation of this theme with nineteenth century Austrian music critic, aesthetician, and historian Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904). Hanslick again positioned beauty and utility in opposition to each other, and he favored the quality of beauty over that of utility, *but* he was against the inspiration of emotions (even those considered beautiful) by music as a determinant of music’s worth. The supposed ability of music to inspire feelings of joy, pain, sorrow, anger, and so forth was of no value to him. Such an interpretation was thus somewhat in opposition to, for example, DeNora’s later understanding of use in music, given that she defines pragmatic use as existing *outside* of expression, whilst Hanslick seems to consider expression itself to be a type of pragmatic use (although, admittedly, a rather dubious one at that, in his view).

Moreover, although, *like* Gautier and others, Hanslick evidently valued the beautiful over the useful in the dialectic, *unlike* Gautier, Baudelaire, and Flaubert, beauty was, for Hanslick, not *only* defined negatively, which is to say, by its *lack* of pragmatic use. The concept was also, for him, defined positively, qualitatively, by precise aspects of its formal structure. As evidence, he states that, “the beauty of a piece of music is specifically musical, i.e., is inherent in the tonal relationships without reference to an extraneous, extramusical context.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, for Hanslick, it is not enough for music to be pragmatically useless in order for it to be beautiful; it must also have some positive formal traits as well. This mentality, in which music is valued according to its formal properties, is related to that of Aristotle, in its focus on structure. Yet, it also *differs* from that of Aristotle, in its lack of concern for the effect of the beautiful on us, instead considering the beautiful as indifferent to our impressions and reactions, an understanding more in alignment in *this* regard with the ancient Greek music theorists, Kant, and Gautier.

Hanslick’s comprehension resonated with those of other thinkers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well. Eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), for instance, likewise privileged musical form in determining the value of a piece of music. However, he also worked to move beyond mere formalism in such a determination, thus defining beauty as, “the sensual appearance of the idea.”<sup>15</sup> Nineteenth and twentieth century Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) and twentieth century Ger-

man philosopher, musicologist, sociologist, and psychologist Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) likewise looked to musical form to ascertain aesthetic value. Yet, Adorno declared a focus on the physical experience of music, such as that advocated by Aristotle, to be naïve, perhaps demonstrating a bias favoring the mind over the body in this other duality. Moreover, unlike many thinkers *prior* to this point, he considered the role of culture in his determination of aesthetical value, advocating for an aesthetics that was not limited to simple objectivity on one hand, nor completely determined by the contextual particularity of an object's situation of creation on the other. Finally, Adorno believed that the beautiful possessed an otherworldly power and a redemptive capacity.

### The Contrary and the Privileging of Use

One could go on discussing diverse interpretations of the beautiful and the useful in music and elsewhere seemingly indefinitely. Indeed, this cursory enumeration is not meant to be exhaustive. Such a task would be impossible, certainly within this limited amount of space. Nor is it expected to be absolute, likewise a futile undertaking.

At the same time, this account is not intended to demonstrate that the useful has *never* been valued. Assuredly, there are examples of the privileging of the useful, or, at minimum, the acknowledgement of its worth, across diverse eras. There were those Ancient Greek music theorists, for instance, that favored the utility of music for the purposes of indoctrination, discipline, socialization, and pacification. Aristotle himself attempted to justify the utility of music in these regards, as did Pythagoras and Plato (c.428/427–c.348/347 BCE).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, French Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) heralded the useful in the arts, writing that, “[o]f all conditions, that which is most independent of luck and men is that of the artisan. The artisan only depends on his work; thus, he is free.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, Rousseau took a view opposite that of Schiller, viewing utility, rather than beauty, as necessary for freedom. Then, in the early decades of the twentieth century, a widespread glorification of the utilitarian as an aesthetic was witnessed with the exaltation of the pragmatic in French composer Erik Satie’s (1866–1922) *musique d’ameublement* and French poet, playwright, novelist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau’s (1889–1963) championing of the utilitarian and the simple, amongst other things, in his treatise, *Le Coq et l’arlequin* (1918).<sup>18</sup> Following this, musicologist Paul Nettl (1889–1972) explored *Gebrauchsmusik*, or utility music, such as for a dance, military ceremony, or political rally; scholar Heinrich Bessler (1900–1969) appropriated the term, believing that the aesthetical enjoyment of music could only be accessed by active involvement with the music, such as by dancing; and Béla Bartók (1881–1945), Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), Paul Hindemith (1895–1963), Carl Orff (1895–1982), and Aaron Copland (1900–1990) actively wrote music with such a utilitarian aesthetic as its goal. Finally, further into the 1930s, music was promoted for political and social utilitarian purposes, as with *fascist aesthetics* in Nazi Germany and the concept of *socialist realism* in the Soviet Union. However, whilst individuals such as these have championed the merits of utility in music, the same personages have often been relatively silent on beauty. This is certainly with regards to their *definition* of utility. Thus, we cannot be certain of their understanding of a possible dialectic between the two. As a result, their stance does not necessarily constitute a negation of the beauty–utility dialectic as traditionally understood, so, to that extent, its presence may in fact be moot.

Finally, I do not aim to say that beauty and utility have *always* been considered incompatible. Indeed, whilst beauty and utility were separate for Schiller, and beauty was the absence of utility for him, beauty could, nevertheless, fulfill a utilitarian purpose, in terms of social, political, and physical betterment, a concept that might have resonated with Aristotle as well. Similarly, despite Rousseau’s emphasis on utilitarian activity, he did still appreciate the potential non-functional appeal of a utilitarian creation. As proof, he stated that, “in the form of works determined by utility, elegance and taste are not excluded.”<sup>19</sup> And likewise, in the early twenty-first century, American philosopher Denis Dutton (1944–2010) claimed that beauty, which he also linked to virtuosity, had a pragmatic use, specifically an evolutionary one. Thus, although utility did not (necessarily) serve beauty, beauty

could (and, according to him, did) serve utility, again similar to the mindsets of Aristotle and Schiller. Nevertheless, in spite of these more unusual viewpoints, the overarching beauty-utility dialectic and the preference for the beautiful remain. As a result, so, too, does the question *why*.

### Use and the Academy

The question is of particular concern for us as scholars. This is especially on account of scholarship's ironic stance toward the two qualities. On the one hand, at least in terms of Western art music, going back to the beginnings of historical musicology and music theory in the nineteenth century, scholarship has traditionally shown a strong preference for studying music that has been considered pragmatically useless, which, as we have seen, has often been equated with the beautiful. One need only consider the work of Schenker, for example, and the ongoing centrality of his thinking in the discipline of music theory to find proof. Moreover, this fact is significant, because, as Joseph Kerman reminds us, "[a]esthetic judgment is concentrated tacitly on the initial choice of material to be analyzed[.]"<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, New Musicology in particular has, in recent decades, worked to demonstrate the cultural use of music, especially in terms of ideology, identity, and cultural context. Indeed, questions concerning music's supposed cultural work addressing matters of politics, social relations, race, class, religion, gender, gender identity, and sexuality, have been of primary importance for many in the field for dozens of years. Thus, it would appear that musicology is actually doing quite a bit of work with music deemed pragmatically useful. Yet, the field has dispensed considerably less effort in studying functionally useful music in terms of études, test pieces, audition repertoire, competition works, commercial music, ring tones, and so forth, especially within the realm of Western classical music. Thus, it would appear that New Musicology has, in fact, left vast swatches of the *most* pragmatically useful music virtually untouched. Unquestionably, some scholars, including DeNora and Timothy Taylor, have started to change their approach.<sup>21</sup> Yet, such research still lags far behind comparable work in popular music studies and ethnomusicology. Furthermore, much of the change in approach is still in reaction to an established beauty-utility dialectic that favors the beautiful.

This is all ironic, given that, at the same time, New Musicology, along with other humanities disciplines functioning under the postmodern auspices of New Historicism, has paradoxically taken great pains to depict its *own* work as being pragmatically useful. This point has been driven home repeatedly and extensively by scholars as diverse as Abraham Flexner, Nuccio Ordine, and James Currie.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it would appear as though the investigation of the beauty-utility dialectic is of particular import for music scholarship.

### Of Commodities, Commodities, and the Abject

Gautier's stance, then, provides an appropriate starting point with which to consider this dialectical situation. Indeed, the extremity of his sentiment puts into greatest relief that which so many others, to a lesser, more subtle, and more nuanced extent, have argued. The writer, with his quote, mentioned earlier, self-evidently associates utility with need, particularly *human* need. For him, all need is repulsive because it indicates a lack, or an infirmity, in the subject. Thus, the toilet is the epitome of usefulness, because it is there to accommodate a human need, and a lack of the ability to transcend such animalistic and vital necessity. Consequently, music with strong utilitarian functions, such as method books, exercises, didactic études (as opposed to artistic études, including those by Franz Liszt (1811–1886) and Frederic Chopin (1810–1849)), test pieces (like the Paris Conservatoire *solos de concours*, or exam solos), orchestral audition excerpts, religious hymns, propagandistic music, fight songs, commercial jingles, and ring tones likewise point to human need and frailty. Method books, exercises, and didactic études, for example, exist to remedy a need, that is, the lack of technical or musical ability in a performer. Likewise, orchestral excerpts are performed as such, outside of the context of an orchestra, because the performer is in need of employment, and the orchestra has need of a performer. Hymns of praise imply the inferiority, and hence inadequacy, of the human suppli-

cant; propagandistic music signifies a social or political urgency that must be remedied; and commercial jingles endure because a company needs, or wants, to acquire a profit. Finally, ring tones alert their recipient of need by another. For Gautier, then, and perhaps for many of us, these musics could not possibly also be beautiful, or, at minimum, not *as* beautiful as they would have been, absent such pragmatic utility.

Gautier's thoughts on need, and by association, usefulness, very much echo twentieth and twenty-first century Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's (b.1941) thoughts on the abject. For Kristeva, the abject is neither subject nor object. Rather, it is devoid of signification. Thus, in terms of value, it is worth nothing. Moreover, the abject, for Kristeva, is that which we reject and exclude, an act that we undertake in order to define *ourselves* as subjects. To this end, according to Kristeva, we create the abject as rejectamenta and separate ourselves from it, for the sake of inducing in our world some semblance of safety and security, whether real or imagined. Hence, with the abject, we wall ourselves off from everything else that there is, in the interest of ultimately allowing ourselves to live, either literally or figuratively.

For Kristeva, examples of the abject include a despised food item, filth, waste, dung, vomit, a pus-filled wound, and crime, especially premeditated crime.<sup>23</sup> All of these examples are items that disgust and horrify us, and thus, we distance ourselves from them and label them the abject. However, the preeminent example of the abject for Kristeva is the corpse, the most disgusting and horrifying of all. She explains that, "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."<sup>24</sup> The corpse is thus everything that we do not wish ourselves to be, and hence, we recoil from it in horror, walling it off from ourselves.

According to Kristeva, the abject terrifies us, as in these circumstances and others, because it indicates a lack, or an infirmity, in ourselves, and this lack we find threatening. We cannot handle the implied personal imperfection, and metaphorically, we run from it. Moreover, the abject illuminates a lack of a border confining and delineating us as unique, individual subjects. Indeed, Kristeva writes that, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, [and] order. What does not respect border, positions, [or] rules."<sup>25</sup> Hence, the abject destroys our sense of security, however illusory. Thus, we fear it and thrust it out, just as we do the corpse, the once-living human turned non-living, because it reminds us that we, as living creatures, are not so distinct and safe from the non-living as we once had thought. Furthermore, the abject reminds us of our lack of autonomy, independence, agency, and security, all items that we typically assume that we possess. By emphasizing to us our own subjectivity to the same needs and fates as all other living creatures, when confronted with the abject, we lose our sense of boundaries and our sense of self. With the abject, we are no longer safely and securely separate from everything else. In sum, as Kristeva says, the abject "pulverizes the subject."<sup>26</sup>

Thus, whilst not nearly as extreme as Kristeva's corpse, for some of us, on some level, Gautier's toilet is a threat, as are even *études* and test pieces, in their subtle reminder to us of our lack, our infirmity, our imperfections, our paucity in terms of agency and autonomy, and our dearth of complete separateness and distinction from all else that there is. Hence, these items, as the pragmatically useful and the functionally utilitarian, are, on some level, the abject, or, at minimum, *symbolic* of the abject; indeed, it matters not which, as the effects are identical. Thus, we, like Aristotle, Kant, Schiller, Gautier, and others, thrust them, as the pragmatically useful, out from our definitions of the beloved beautiful, leading, in part, to the beauty-utility dialectic, and the preference for the beautiful.

### The Useful Sublime

However, it does not end there. Kristeva views the abject as being on the edge of the sublime, and indeed, her definition of the abject correlates closely with eighteenth century Irish-British statesman, economist, and philosopher Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) take on the sublime, as well as Kant's own view of the sublime, facts that further underscore and explain this perceived dialectic.

Burke himself conceived of the beautiful and the sublime in opposition, and it is true that he is believed to be the first to separate the pair of traits into two distinct categories. Like Kant's views of the beautiful, the pleasant, and the good, Burke understands beauty and the sublime in terms of sensations of pleasure and pain. However, unlike Kant, he regards neither beauty nor the sublime in terms of form or lack thereof. Instead, he relates beauty to the passion of love, as well as to the five senses, the latter akin to Aristotle, and he connects the sublime to the passion of fear, especially terror. Use, which he considers in terms of form rather than function, is not involved in his conception of either the beautiful or the sublime. Nonetheless, his views are still applicable for us here. For, given that, according to Burke, whilst the *beautiful* is that which is well-built and aesthetically pleasing, the *sublime* is that which has the ability to impel and eradicate us. We see that Kristeva's abject can correspond to Burke's conception of the sublime, in that, for Kristeva, the abject destroys the subject, just as, for Burke, the sublime has the power to exterminate us, *as* subjects. In other words, the sublime, whether literally, by harming us physically, or figuratively, by making apparent our lack, annihilates us, as does the abject.

Kristeva's interpretation of the abject is still more in alignment with Kant's consideration of the sublime. For Kant, the sublime, like the beautiful, is indifferent to us as subjects.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is objective rather than subjective. Moreover, for him, the sublime is akin to the beautiful in that both are represented as universally valid, devoid of interest, possessing of subjective purposiveness, and necessary.<sup>28</sup> However, whilst the beautiful for Kant is a function of form, the sublime, by contrast, is formless and without border.<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, as we have seen, regards the abject, too, as formless and without border. The sublime is also a totality and an absolute, and it is associated with chaos, wildness, irregularity, disorder, and desolation.<sup>30</sup> This is likewise the case with Kristeva's abject. It is all-encompassing, and it appears to break with all rules and order. Then, whilst, for Kant, the beautiful is purposive, sustains life, and engages the imagination, the sublime appears to violate purpose and likewise does violence to the imagination.<sup>31</sup> The abject does this, too, as it horrifies us and upends our sense of self within the universe. At the same time, the mind is not only attracted to the sublime, as with the beautiful, but, akin to enchantment, it is also repelled by it.<sup>32</sup> Thus, we are both drawn to the sublime, and we desire to turn away from it, as is so often the case with the abject. Finally, for Kant, beauty is defined in terms of *quality*, whereas the sublime is defined in terms of *quantity*.<sup>33</sup> The inherently better *quality* an object is, the more beautiful it becomes, whilst the greater the *quantity* of the object there is, the more sublime it becomes. Hence, with the beautiful, something is left out, some imperfection, resulting in a lack in the beautiful object itself. This is opposed to the sublime, in which the lack, or infirmity, or need, is in *us*, as beholding subjects, whether in our inability as musicians, in need of technical études, or our vulnerability as living creatures, subject to mortality. In all of these regards, the abject, too, follows the sublime, in that, with its totality, it makes us aware of our lack.

*Ergo*, because we can understand the useful as the abject, as well as the abject as the sublime, we can, by consequence, conceptualize the useful, too, as the sublime. Then, given this comprehension of the useful as sublime, along with both Burke's and Kant's opposition of the beautiful and the sublime, it becomes logical how and why so many amongst us have passionately opposed beauty and utility, in our various conceptions of the terms, as well as why we may have often upheld the beautiful as the superior of the two, as Kant himself did. Beauty, with its boundaries, and hence its certainties, is comforting and non-threatening. The useful, by contrast, as the abject and the sublime, with its unboundedness, its intimidating immensity, and its pointing to our own lack, can be uncertain and thus frightening. Hence, it can cause us to reject it.

### Toward the Future

Given this possible explanation for the commonality of the beauty-utility dialectic, then, what do we do? We may initially choose to focus our studies on the form of utilitarian music, disregarding its pragmatic function, for instance. Some have already done precisely that.



Moreover, upon the foundation developed here, and with further consideration, we may be able to upend the dialectic altogether. One way to do this may be to consider how the pragmatically useful in music might actually be beautiful. Indeed, that is the next portion of the larger project of which the present article is but a small part.

At this point, though, we might also consider disturbing the dialectic by contemplating what it might *mean* to regard pragmatically useful music – and the functionally utilitarian more broadly – as sublime. For one, we may attempt to view the useful with admiration, reverence, and respect, or even with astonishment and awe. According to Burke, these are passions caused by the sublime in nature. Indeed, the sublime, and hence, utility, are not all negative, and thus, they may be worthy of such positive attention. For, unlike Kant, Burke, in *his* dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime, clearly favored the sublime. As evidence, he praised it, stating that, “it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>34</sup> Such an understanding on our behalf may open up new possibilities when we consider a method book, a test piece, a commercial jingle, or a ring tone as sublime, and, by consequence, as something all-powerful, all-consuming, and awe-inspiring.

We may also improvise on Kant’s tune and become, at least momentarily, indifferent to musical utility’s usefulness, as seemingly paradoxical as that may initially appear. Hence, instead of making use of music’s usefulness, we would rather stand back and reflect upon its use, its *ability* to be useful, and the *way* it which it is pragmatically useful, all in a contemplative manner. In the process, we may, to borrow from Hegel, actually sublimate pragmatic use ourselves. Thus, we may cancel our initial judgment of the useful, preserve its essence, and then elevate it.

These are but a few potentials. Nevertheless, it is clear that, by considering such an as-of-yet unconventional understanding of the pragmatically useful in music, we open the door to further novel comprehensions. Hence, in the words of nineteenth century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), may we “dwell in Possibility,” and consider the possibilities that might await us when we cast aside traditional notions of a beauty-utility dialectic, along with any innate preferences for the beautiful. Indeed, may we consider what we may find when we instead view the utilitarian in music and elsewhere as the sublime.

*State University of New York at Fredonia, USA*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1333a30 ff. For more on the three ways of life, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 5 and *Eudemian Ethics*, 1215a35 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 980a22 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *De institutione musica*.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1914), 59–63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–63, 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–65.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man and Letters to Prince Frederick Christian von Augustenburg*, trans. Keith Tribe (Penguin Random House, 2016), 5.



- <sup>12</sup> “Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien ; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c’est l’expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l’homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature. – L’endroit le plus utile d’une maison, ce sont les latrines.” Translation my own. Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (Paris: C. Charpentier, 1880).
- <sup>13</sup> “Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure,…” Translation my own. Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, December 16, 1852 in *Littérature Francophone* (Paris: Groupe de la Cité international Création-Diffusion, 1992), 85.
- <sup>14</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), xxiii.
- <sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics*, ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoband (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- <sup>17</sup> “De toutes les conditions, la plus indépendante de la fortune et des hommes est celle de l’artisan. L’artisan ne dépend que de son travail.” Translation my own. Catherine Bouttier, *Les Plus Belles Pages des Lumières* (Omnibus, 2015), 147.
- <sup>18</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* (Nanu Press, 1918, 2009).
- <sup>19</sup> “dans la forme des ouvrages que l’utilité détermine, l’élégance et le goût ne sont pas exclus.” Translation my own. Bouttier, *Les Plus Belles Pages*, 20, 147.
- <sup>20</sup> Joseph Kerman, “How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out” *Critical Inquiry* 7/2 (1980): 314.
- <sup>21</sup> DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*; Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4.
- <sup>22</sup> Moreover, as they have argued against such an approach, Flexner, Ordine, and Currie have all, in various manners, demonstrated how, ironically, scholarship pursued for its own sake, with no intent for pragmatic use, can sometimes, perhaps even often, produce the most pragmatically useful results. Abraham Flexner, “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge,” *Harper’s Magazine* 179 (June/October 1939): 544-552; Nuccio Ordine, *The Usefulness of the Useless*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, Inc., 2017); James R. Currie, “After Relevance” (paper, Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Boston, Massachusetts, November 2019); James Currie, “Music After All” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62, no. 1 (spring 2009): 145-203.
- <sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2-4.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Kant, *Judgment*, 96.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>34</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Basil: J.J. Tourneisen, 1792), 47.

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# Musical Performance Evaluation: Ten Insights from Psychological Studies of Aesthetic Judgment

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PATRIK N. JUSLIN

**Abstract:** Performance evaluation is of great importance to the development of musical performance. Yet, we know little about the psychological process that underlies such evaluations. In this essay, I argue that performance evaluation is essentially a form of aesthetic judgment, and that recent findings from psychological studies of aesthetics may provide valuable insights. First, I present a preliminary model of aesthetic judgment. Then, I outline a methodological paradigm which has proved useful in capturing the judgment process. This is followed by a consideration of ten insights about aesthetic judgment of music from recent studies. Finally, implications for music education are discussed. I ask whether there is such a thing as ‘good’ performance evaluation, and – if so – what this might entail. It is proposed that evaluation is a skill that can be trained based on feedback from analytic models which make the aesthetic judgment process transparent to musicians and listeners alike.

*Keywords:* aesthetics, evaluation, judgment, music, performance, reliability

## 1. Introduction

Evaluations of music performance occur in a large number of contexts, and have important consequences: They are made when music students apply for admission to a conservatoire, and when musicians audition for a job in an orchestra; they are made, repeatedly, by record producers; they guide consumers and have an effect on music sales and download numbers; they are used in studies of music performance (e.g., in studies of sight-reading ability); and they contribute to musical experiences in everyday life. Evaluations may also be seen in the daily work of music teachers – for example when a teacher gives feedback about a student’s performance during a lesson to help the student to improve the performance.

Understandably, then, performance evaluation has received a great deal of attention in the education literature (see Barry, 2009; Bergee, 2003; Fiske, 1983; Parkes, 2010; Schleuter, 1997; Waddell et al., 2019). McPherson and Schubert (2004) provide a helpful discussion of contextual factors that can impact on the evaluation of a performance, with regard to fairness and reliability. However, surprisingly few studies to date have investigated the *psychological* characteristics of the evaluative process itself.

Still, in order to legitimize the use of performance evaluation in various forms of ‘high stakes’ testing (e.g., in contests, end-of-course examinations, orchestra auditions, and degree classifications), there are some important questions that should be addressed:

- Do different judges agree in their evaluation of a performance?
- Does a judge make stable evaluations of the same performance over time?
- Which criteria do judges rely on in their evaluations?
- Do different judges rely on the same set of criteria?
- Is performance evaluation affected by musical expertise?

- Do judges understand how they make their evaluations?
- Can the evaluative process be made more transparent?
- Is there such a thing as ‘good’ performance evaluation?

## 2. Performance Evaluation as Aesthetic Judgment

In this essay, I will focus on performance evaluation within the context of the *work* vs. *performance* distinction, which is typical of most notated Western classical music. The focus is on evaluating performances as *performances of a particular work*; the object of evaluation is the specific sounds deriving from the performer’s activity (Levinson, 1987).

I will further make a distinction between the *measurement* of a performance (which is ‘objective’) and the *evaluation* (assessment, judgment) of a performance (which is – more or less – subjective). Although some aspects of performance may be measured objectively (e.g., intonation; e.g., Gabrielsson, 1999), it might be argued that the most *important* performance aspects (e.g., interpretation, musicality, expressivity, and originality) cannot be satisfactorily measured in a truly objective manner.

In fact, McPherson and Schubert (2004) labeled it one of the “flawed assumptions” (p. 65) about performance evaluation that the musical value of a performance could be assessed accurately and reliably – that we can somehow access the ‘true’ value of a performance. One problem is that performance evaluation is affected not only by the music, but also by various non-musical factors (see next section).

However, even if the evaluator would be able to focus only on the *musical* features of a performance, his or her evaluation would still not be objectively accurate in a straightforward sense (which is not to say that we should not strive towards making evaluation as reliable and valid as it can be). This reflects the nature of the evaluative process itself: assessment requires judgments about *value*, and music is commonly regarded as one of the fine arts (Kivy, 1991).

Accordingly, I will argue that music performance evaluation is, ultimately, a form of *aesthetic* judgment, and that we may hopefully gain some valuable insights from studies of aesthetic judgment in music. Clearly, a first step toward better performance evaluation is to understand the underlying psychological process.

I define *aesthetic judgment* here as a process by which the value of a piece of music as ‘art’ is determined, based on one or more subjective criteria (e.g., novelty, expressivity, and beauty) which relate to properties of the artwork, either its form or its content (Juslin, 2013). Moreover, I submit that aesthetic judgments of music are neither completely ‘objective’, nor merely ‘subjective’: They involve psychophysical *interactions* between objective properties of the music and person-dependent impressions of the judge. Thus, *there are no absolute or universal criteria for aesthetic value*. As any historical review would demonstrate, aesthetic norms change over time in society.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, for example, when it comes specifically to musical performance, philosopher Jerrold Levinson (1987) observes that “performances of music are *legitimately* evaluated from a number of different perspectives”. He suggests that “there is no *single, overriding* point of view concerning performances such that whatever seems good from that point of view qualifies in effect as an *absolutely* good performance of the work”; he concedes that there might well be “a *particular* point of view that is arguably most *central* to evaluative assessment” (p. 75). Yet, “there is no simple answer to how good a performance is” since every evaluation is dependent on “a context of assessment in which certain objectives are taken as paramount” (p. 82).

Does this suggest that aesthetic judgments are necessarily arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and unreliable? No, aesthetic judgments may actually be more systematic than is often assumed, once one takes a closer look at their characteristics. Aesthetic judgments can be statistically modeled. Doing so invites us to consider more closely *when*, *how*, and *why* such judgments of music differ and what – if anything – can be done about it.

### 3. A Preliminary Model

In this essay, I will adopt a psychological model outlined by Juslin (2013, 2019), which focuses specifically on aesthetic judgment in music experience: Figure 1. Aesthetic judgment is regarded as one of several psychological mechanisms that may evoke emotions in listeners during music listening.

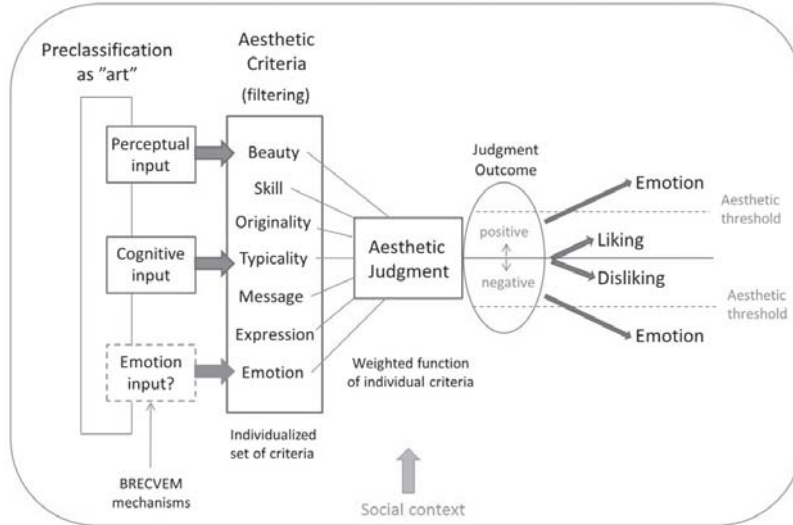


Figure 1

Consistent with many theories in aesthetics (see Levinson, 2003), it is assumed that the aesthetic judgment process begins when the listener adopts an *aesthetic attitude* to the music. This is a particular *mode* of listening that brings a focus on those properties of the music that are regarded as relevant for its value as ‘art’: The listener’s attention is focused on the music and one or more criteria for aesthetic value are brought to bear on the music.

Once an aesthetic attitude has been adopted, both perceptual and cognitive analyses of the music will proceed, providing ‘inputs’ to the aesthetic judgment process (Figure 1). This can be construed as a continuously on-going process. Aesthetic processing can be influenced by factors in the *music*, the *perceiver*, and the *situation*. Information related to each of these factors is channelled through the perception (e.g., sensory impressions of low-level features), cognition (e.g., input that depends on conceptual knowledge), and emotion (induced by other psychological mechanisms) of the listener (Juslin, 2013). However, whether these inputs will have an effect on the resulting aesthetic judgment depends on the listener’s criteria: Figure 1. The criteria serve as ‘filters’ and determine what information is relevant to the judgment task.

Based on preliminary survey findings regarding aesthetic criteria (Juslin & Isaksson, 2014), the model postulates that judgments involve individual sets of subjective criteria for aesthetic value and a relative weighting of the criteria. The model illustrates that judges can differ in terms of *how many* criteria they use, *which* criteria they use, and how these criteria are *weighted*. The overall judgment represents a weighted function of the specific criteria.

As regards evaluation of *performances* within the context of instrumental teaching, the specific aspects evaluated may involve personal criteria, criteria that have been identified by various authorities, or a combination of these two (for examples, see Thompson et al., 1998). As noted by Gabrielsson (1999), “there are hardly any agreed-upon criteria, neither for what should be judged, nor for how the judgments should be made” (p. 577).

However, McPherson and Schubert (2004) argued based on the published literature that there are at least four general types of competencies, which are commonly assessed by music institutions: *technique* (physiological, physical and instrumental), *interpretation* (e.g., faithful reading of the score; authenticity, in terms of understanding the style or composer intentions), *expression* (e.g., the projection of mood, conveying of structural aspects), and *communication* (e.g., confidence, holding the audience's attention).

An assessment of specific criteria occurs continuously, but judgment outcomes will be produced at particular points in time (cued by significant moments in the music, such as the ending of a piece, or when a teacher needs to provide feedback on a student's performance). If the judgment process indicates that on balance the performance is good, this will result in liking (preference). Conversely, if the process indicates that the music is *not* so good, it will result in disliking. In both of these cases, no emotion is necessarily evoked. If, however, the result of the judgment is that the music is judged as extraordinarily good (or bad), overall or on at least one of the criteria, an emotion (e.g., awe) will be aroused in addition to liking. In this essay, I focus on the judgment process *per se*, rather than on the affect it might induce.

*Social context* (Figure 1, bottom) refers to the fact that although aesthetic judgments of music are, ideally, mostly influenced by evaluations of criteria related to the music itself, any music evaluation is affected by other factors which impact on the reliability of the evaluation (McPherson & Schubert, 2004). Factors such as visual impressions, social prestige, audience support, and stereotyping could all affect aesthetic judgments. In the following, I will mostly leave out contextual factors and focus on how musical aspects are evaluated.

#### 4. Analyzing Judgments

It has been suggested that judges may be unaware of which criteria they actually use in their assessments (Gabrielsson, 2003). This seems to present us with a problem: How can we capture the listener's judgment strategy if it is mostly tacit and cannot be reported accurately by the listener?

From cognitive psychology, we might obtain some initial clues about the nature of the aesthetic judgment process and also a useful analytic paradigm for studying such judgments. The paradigm is termed *Judgment Analysis* (Cooksey, 1996). Inspired by Brunswik's (1956) *lens model*, judgment analysts employ multiple regression models to capture how individual judges combine multiple differentially weighted pieces of information to arrive at an overall judgment. Similarly, if we wish to study aesthetic judgment in music, we can ask listeners to rate the aesthetic value of pieces of music that vary in different aesthetic dimensions such as novelty. The aim would be to predict listeners' overall judgments based on criteria.

Although objective features of the music can be manipulated and have an effect on the listener, such effects are 'mediated' by the *perception* of the listener. Previous studies found that subjective impressions (e.g., subjectively perceived complexity) are better predictors of responses than objective measures (e.g., objectively measured complexity; cf. Hargreaves & North, 2010). Hence, it makes more sense to use subjective impressions of criteria – as rated by listeners – as predictors of overall judgments in multiple regression analyses.

The strength of this method is that a listener's judgment strategy can be extracted in the statistical analysis independently of any conscious awareness of criterion use that the listener may have. The judgment strategy is revealed by the complex statistical interdependencies of overall judgments and rated criteria. Thus, multiple regression models can provide measures of the different aspects of the judgment process (as illustrated in Figure 1).

#### 5. Ten Insights From Studies of Aesthetic Judgment

Armed with the model and the analytic paradigm proposed above, our research group has investigated different aspects of the aesthetic judgment process in a series of studies. In the following, I will



consider some potentially important insights from these studies as well as some pioneering studies in music education, which align nicely with research conducted in psychology. Not all of the studies focused specifically on aspects of music performance, but it is a reasonable assumption that the underlying cognitive process will not be radically different if a judge focuses merely on the performance, as opposed to the music as a whole (e.g., regardless of focus, the process will necessarily involve a weighting of criteria which reflects the processing constraints of human cognition).

*(1) Judges generally show low inter-rater agreement*

Because aesthetic judgments of music have important consequences in many contexts, it appears relevant to investigate whether judges are reliable (cf. Fiske, 1983; Juslin et al., 2021; Manturzewska, 2011). First, we need to consider *inter-judge* reliability: Do different listeners make similar (overall) aesthetic judgments of the same music? In two listening tests (Juslin et al., 2016, 2021), listeners varying in musical expertise judged the overall aesthetic value of 72 musical excerpts from 12 different genres, selected by means of a *stratified random sampling* procedure to obtain a reasonably broad and representative sample of music. In order to obtain a measure of the inter-rater agreement in the listeners' judgments, we computed the intraclass correlation coefficient. The coefficients for three groups (.18, .24, and .16, respectively) were all indicative of 'poor' inter-rater reliability.

A music educator may perhaps object that the above studies did not focus specifically on performances or that the judges were not experienced enough. However, our results may not be explained away that easily. A previous study of performance evaluation offers rather similar results. Manturzewska (2011) analyzed 2156 ratings given by 28 members of the jury of the Sixth International F. Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, where they evaluated 77 performances of one of Chopin's Polonaises. The members of the jury were "music experts of the highest international reputation" (p. 99). Manturzewska observed very large individual differences in judgments.

Reflecting on ratings of particular performances, Manturzewska (2011) asked "which judge was 'right': the one who gave performance B 14 points, i.e., fair, or the one who gave 25 points, the highest possible rating? And who is right for performance E? The judge who gave 1 point (almost the worst rating possible) or the one who rated the performance at 16, i.e., good?" (p. 104). Manturzewska was puzzled as to why members of the jury differed to such an extent: "What are the reasons for these inconsistencies?" (p. 104).

*(2) Judges show moderate intra-rater reliability*

A second aspect of judge reliability concerns the *intra-rater* reliability: Does the same listener make similar judgments over time? Here, previous findings are somewhat mixed. In one of our listening tests, one of the music examples was – unbeknownst to the participants – repeated (appearing 24 excerpts apart, to reduce memory effects; Juslin et al., 2021).

In order to obtain an estimate of intra-judge reliability (or stability), we tested the mean difference in rating of the repeated piece between the first and second trial, using a dependent samples *t*-test. Although the piece was rated slightly higher in aesthetic value the second time than the first time (Cohen's  $d = 0.132$ ), the difference was not statistically significant; and the test-retest reliability was  $r = .713$ . (A reliability of greater than or equal to .70 is usually considered 'acceptable').

However, the test-retest reliability might be reduced if the judgments are farther apart in time. Höfel and Jacobsen (2003) studied the temporal stability of aesthetic judgments of visual (graphic) patterns. In a first session, psychology students were asked to judge 252 patterns. In a second session, the same participants were asked to categorize 80 of the same patterns again.

Owing to external circumstances, the time span between these sessions varied from one day to 14 months, which made it possible to study the temporal stability. When the time span was only a few days, the two judgments were relatively stable. (In the most trivial case where the two ratings of a repeated stimulus occur *very* close in time, a judge may simply *remember* both stimulus and score.) However, with longer time spans, judgments differed significantly.

In addition, in accordance with the interactionist view of aesthetics described in Section 2 (i.e., that judgments depend on both characteristics of the *stimulus* and characteristics of the *judge*) intra-rater reliability can also be moderated by the type of stimuli judged. Fiske (1983) studied the intra-judge reliability of experienced musicians, when they rated a set of *different performances of the same piece*. This is arguably a more ‘difficult’ set of musical excerpts to judge. Unbeknownst to the judges, some of the performances were repeated so that the raters provided two ratings of these performances. Fiske discovered *very* low correlations between the first and second set of ratings of the same performances. He argued that judges may have applied the criteria inconsistently, but as explained below, most judges are quite consistent.

A more likely explanation could be that there were strong *order effects* in the test (e.g., Flôres & Ginsburgh, 1996), which influenced the listeners’ impressions (and thus ratings) of the criteria, and that these order effects had an overriding effect on the overall judgments, as compared to the subtle differences between fairly similar performances of the same piece.

### (3) Judges are usually internally consistent

In this particular context, the term *consistency* (sometimes also called *cognitive control* in the judgment-analysis literature; Cooksey, 1996) refers to the degree to which the judge is able to execute a judgment strategy in a consistent manner across different cases (as opposed to the *same* case, like when estimating intra-rater reliability).

Note that high consistency is necessary (but not sufficient) in order for judges to have high (interrater and intrarater) reliability. And if a judge is consistent in executing a specific judgment strategy (i.e., high cognitive control), an analyst will find it is easier to model and predict his or her judgments across cases than if the judge is inconsistent. Thus, for instance, in Judgment Analysis, a large multiple correlation is usually regarded as indicative of a high internal consistency of the judge (Cooksey, 1996).

In the studies mentioned earlier (Juslin et al., 2016, 2021), we modeled music listeners using multiple regression analyses that aimed to predict the judges’ overall judgments based on the ratings of individual criteria. The mean multiple correlation ( $R = .88$ ) showed that the models provided a good fit to the data; that the judgment process was systematic and mainly additive; and that the judges were very consistent. Thus, to explain low inter-rater reliability in aesthetic judgments, we need to look beyond judges’ internal consistency.

### (4) Judges tend to rely on only a few criteria

Although preliminary survey data indicated that a potentially large number of criteria may be involved (Juslin & Isaksson, 2014), there is reason to suspect that individual judges actually utilize a much smaller number. To start with there are working memory limitations suggesting that judges should not use more than about four criteria (Cowan, 2010). General studies of human judgments have found that judges in different domains tend to use a small number of criteria, fewer than the judges themselves report (Brehmer & Brehmer, 1988). Is the same true of aesthetic judgments?

A fair indication of which criteria listeners rely on in their aesthetic judgments is given by the beta weights ( $\beta$ ) of the predictors (i.e., the aesthetic criteria) in each listener model. In accordance with previous studies, a predictor may be considered used by the judge if its beta weight is significant (Harries et al., 2000). Although the number of criteria varied, we found that most judges relied on between one and three criteria ( $M = 2.38$  and  $2.29$ , respectively, in two samples; Juslin et al., 2016, 2021).

### (5) Individual differences between judges reflect the use of different criteria

An early indication that this is the case came from a study by Thompson et al., (1998), which adopted a new approach, the so-called *repertory grid technique*. Five adjudicators were asked to report the constructs (or criteria) they used to compare and evaluate six expert performances of a Chopin

etude. The adjudicators were then asked to rate the performances, using these same constructs. The results revealed that the adjudicators used different criteria, but since not all adjudicators rated the same criteria, the ratings are not directly comparable.

Further evidence comes from our studies of listeners' aesthetic judgments (Juslin et al., 2016) where judges rated musical excerpts on criteria selected based on aesthetics (cf. Juslin, 2013; Levinson, 2003), as well as survey data of performers and listeners (Juslin & Isaksson, 2014). Table 1 shows some examples of data for individual judges, in terms of both multiple correlations and beta weights. Note the strikingly different weighting schemes for the criteria of different listeners. Thus, for instance, listener 2 seems to rely much on *emotion*, but not on *expression*, whereas the opposite is true for listener 1. How could we expect two listeners to make a similar overall judgment, if they rely on different criteria?

Listener	Predictors (Criteria)							
	<i>R</i>	Beauty	Originality	Expressivity	Skill	Emotion	Message	Typicality
1.	.95	.13	-.09	.65*	.28*	.09	.02	.17*
2.	.89	.05	.32*	-.31	.44	.43	.24	-.16
3.	.64	.35	.06	.05	.15	.06	.29	.13
4.	.96	.33*	.06	.13	.60*	-.08	-.12	-.03
5.	.91	.35*	.23*	-.03	.40*	.31*	-.19	.04
6.	.97	.04	.59*	.45*	.12	-.28*	.10	.16*

**Table 1:** Examples of individual regression models of aesthetic judgments by six listeners

Note: *R* refers to the multiple correlation of the regression models, which indicate the extent to which overall aesthetic judgments could be predicted based on a linear combination of the criteria for aesthetic value. Criterion data indicate the relative weight of the criteria for each listener in the judgment process (\* indicates that a beta weight was statistically significant,  $p < .05$ ).

[From Juslin et al. (2016). Adapted with permission from the American Psychological Association.]

#### (6) Criteria emphasized by music institutions may not overlap with those of listeners

Although some music institutions have explicitly identified performance criteria to be used in assessments (McPherson & Schubert, 2004), a crucial question is how these criteria compare to those used by regular music listeners in actual judgments of performances. I am not currently aware of any study that has systematically compared the two. (In fact, there is hardly any research on how 'ordinary' listeners (e.g., audiences) judge a performance.) One can, however, make an informal comparison of the criteria emphasized by music institutions (as listed by McPherson & Schubert, 2004, p. 3) with the criteria rated as most important by listeners in questionnaire research (Juslin & Isaksson, 2014) or that correlate most strongly with actual judgments (Juslin et al., 2016, 2021).

Comparisons reveal that music institutions and ordinary listeners share a concern with *technical skill* and *expression*, but that listeners (including musicians) rate *originality* highly and that they also consider it important to be *emotionally moved*; none of these criteria are, it seems, explicitly emphasized in music education. In contrast, *authenticity* (with regard to the composer's intentions or the style) is emphasized by music institutions, but does not seem to play an important role in judgments by adjudicators or listeners.

Further data comes from studies of critical reviews of music performances. Alessandri et al. (2016) content-analyzed 100 reviews of recordings of Beethoven sonatas, published in *Gramophone* between 1934 and 2010. By utilizing a new combination of data reduction and thematic analysis, they extracted some consistent themes in the reviews (e.g., novelty, style, emotion, technical skill). These themes seem to correspond better with the criteria suggested by aestheticians and studies of musicians and music listeners than with the ones emphasized in rubrics or scales used by music institutions.

*(7) Judges have generally low self-insight*

In order for a teacher to be able to provide informative feedback to a student, the teacher has to infer what it is that needs to be addressed; and this, in turn, will depend on the teacher's aesthetic judgments – as well as on his or her self-insight. *Self-insight* refers here to the degree to which judges have an accurate understanding of their own judgment strategy: do they know which criteria they rely on and how these are weighted?

One clue comes from studies of cognition, which show that people are often unable to correctly explain the basis of their own judgments and preferences (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Because judgments are usually intuitive, and based on underlying processes which cannot be elucidated through introspection, judges develop their own implicit causality theories, which correspond poorly with their actual behavior. In their review of multiple-cue judgment tasks, Brehmer and Brehmer (1988) observed that “most subjects in most studies show little insight into their own judgmental processes” (p. 107).

We examined self-insight in a musical setting, using a two-part study design. In the first part, listeners were required to fill out a brief questionnaire and to rate the relative importance of various criteria for their aesthetic judgments of music. In the second part, the same listeners took part in a listening test where they rated 50 pieces of music from various genres regarding ten criteria, as well as overall aesthetic value. To explore self-insight, we compared subjective ratings of criterion importance with statistically recovered patterns of criterion weighting from the regression models of actual judgments (Juslin et al., 2021).

What we found was that most listeners showed a low level of self-insight concerning their own judgment strategies – as shown by the fact that little variance was shared between subjective ratings of criterion importance and objective measures recovered from judgment models ( $M = 32\%$ ); that is, ‘objective’ indices of which criteria actually went together with the listeners’ overall judgments indicated that they frequently relied on criteria they did not emphasize in their self-report or that they emphasized criteria that they did not actually use.

However, we also noticed that there were wide individual differences in self-insight: For some judges, the ‘subjective’ ranking of criteria corresponded well with the ‘objective’ ranking; for others there were considerable discrepancies. Notably, individual level of self-insight was correlated with variance accounted for in the judgment model ( $r = .43$ ), which suggested that judges with greater self-insight may also be more consistent.

*(8) Judges’ musical expertise has a limited influence on their judgments*

One factor that might help to explain individual differences in aesthetic judgments and criterion use is expertise. People tend to believe that experts possess an ability to make finer discriminations than non-experts. We examined the role of musical expertise in our listening tests, where the listeners judged musical excerpts (Juslin et al., 2021). Expertise was indexed in three ways: the listener's (1) extent of formal music education, (2) experience of playing a musical instrument and (3) frequency of focused music listening. To our surprise, judges with a high level of musical expertise did *not* display higher inter-rater agreement, greater internal consistency, or more self-insight.

However, we did find one meaningful link with musical expertise: The number of years a listener had played an instrument was positively correlated with the number of criteria he or she used to make judgments ( $r = .33$ ); that is, the longer the listener had played an instrument, the larger number

of criteria he or she used. This is consistent with previous research showing that experts use a larger number of criteria than non-experts (Brehmer & Brehmer, 1988).

*(9) (Some) experts may be less subject to 'biases' in their judgments*

Perhaps, there is another category of musical expertise, which may have a much larger impact on aesthetic judgments than those considered so far? Lundy (2010) has examined the inter-judge reliability amongst professional music critics. His study featured 5.161 randomly chosen albums in popular music, covering nine genres (of popular music) and ratings by 352 critics compiled from books of reviews, thus resulting in a total of 15.220 album ratings.

Pairs of critics who had rated at least 30 of the same albums were compared to obtain an estimate of consensus. Lundy used a correlation index because it effectively taps into a similar *pattern* of ratings of two judges across albums. Using this index, Lundy found that 87% of the critic pairs showed statistically significant and positive correlations. In contrast, no significant negative correlations were found. The average correlation, which was moderately positive ( $r = .49$ ), meant that only 24% of the variance was shared between the critics.

Even so, critics might still show greater consensus than lay listeners. In a subsequent study, Lundy and Smith (2017) compared the aesthetic judgments of 50 randomly selected albums by professional critics with those by non-professional undergraduates. Critics, who had previously reviewed these albums, showed relatively consensual ratings (mean  $r = .61$ ), and their distributions approached normality. Conversely, relatively few of the lay listeners' ratings were positively correlated (mean  $r = .08$ ) and their distributions deviated more from normality. Strikingly, none of the non-professionals' ratings was correlated with the critics' ratings.

One possible explanation is that lay listeners are more 'biased' in their judgments, than are professional critics. Lundy (2016) provided a list of 11 biases, which "commonly operate in aesthetic judgment, especially among laypersons" (p. 8) – for instance being influenced by unequal levels of familiarity across works; being unduly influenced by one's place in history; basing one's judgment of an artwork on others' reactions to it; assuming that entire genres of artworks are virtually *all* good or bad; basing one's judgments predominately on the topic of an artwork; having unjustifiably negative attitudes toward certain types of art associated with an 'out-group' (distinguished from one's 'in-group'); basing one's judgment on idiosyncratic characteristics of the self that are not relevant (e.g., memories); and making a judgment when one is not in a mental state that is conducive to competent appraisal (e.g., intoxicated).

Only some of the listed biases have been the subject of study in music, though recent studies indicated, for instance, that lay listeners tend to be more influenced by familiarity in their aesthetic judgments than are professional critics (Lundy et al., 2019), and that they are also more subject to personal idiosyncrasies (Lundy et al., 2018), such as basing a judgment on feelings of nostalgia. It can perhaps be tempting to think that if we can only remove such biases from lay listeners' judgments, their ratings will become virtually identical to those of professional critics. As Lundy (2016) argued, "disagreements are not expected to disappear, but they should decrease when the background noise is reduced, and people are disagreeing about aesthetic factors only" (p. 21).

*(10) Inter-rater reliability can be enhanced by enforcing a reliance on similar criteria*

It has been suggested that critics show higher inter-rater agreement than lay listeners because they tend to converge on more similar sets of criteria in their judgments (cf. Juslin, 2019). This raises an important question: Can inter-rater reliability be enhanced by forcing judges to use the same set of criteria? Indeed, several studies of performance evaluation in music education have reported that formal rating scales can be helpful (Fautley & Colwell, 2018; Latimer et al., 2010; McPherson, 1995; Parkes, 2010).

Results show, for example, that fixed criteria may help a music faculty to grade more consistently in jury settings, and that they grade with higher reliability if they use particular criteria, as opposed



to only giving a global grade based on an overall impression of a music performance (Bergee, 2003). This is, presumably, because a standardized rating scale helps judges to recall all relevant criteria.

Standardized rating scales are not without problems, however. As Parkes (2010) notes, teachers may find it hard to agree on descriptors or may ‘adapt’ new descriptors to their own existing evaluation process. There may also be resistance to the task of verbally labelling the most important aspects of performance (Thompson et al., 1998) – that is, the aesthetic aspects. There are further preliminary results indicating that the use of segmented scales can influence the relative balance of evaluation, by producing higher ratings for technical aspects and lower ratings for expressive aspects (Iusca, 2014). Thus, although a standardized scale could clearly have a positive effect on judge reliability, it raises questions about the *validity* of such ratings.

## 6. Implications for Music Education

What are the implications of the reviewed research for the field of music education? Manturzewska (2011) argued that “we must be very cautious in accepting point scores for performance even when they are given by people with the highest level of competence in instrumental performance” (p. 107). Fiske (1994) was even more blunt, claiming that the “evaluation of a performer does not mean anything, until we know how reliable the judge was who evaluated that performance” (p. 76).

In my estimation, musical performance evaluation will tend to be reliable as long as the assessment involves basic-level instrumental teaching, where the focus is primarily on identifying technical deficiencies of a performance, particularly when evaluators rely on a standardized rating scale (McPherson, 1995). Somewhat paradoxically, when the level of performance reaches beyond basic technical competence, the inter-rater agreement might actually decrease because comparisons will then instead hinge more on ill-defined, subtle and elusive criteria such as ‘musicality’, ‘expression’ and ‘originality’ (*aesthetic* aspects). Here, even experts may not agree about criteria (Thompson et al., 1998).

Indeed, a surprising finding was the overall absence of effects of musical expertise on aesthetic judgment (Juslin et al., 2021). Such judgments may reflect more general cognitive characteristics of an individual that cut across domains. For instance, some individuals may be more reflective and insightful or less biased than others *in general*. Another increasingly plausible possibility is that musical performance evaluation is a *unique* skill that could (and should) be *trained*, alongside the skills of music performance (Waddell et al., 2019). Such a proposition also raises an important question: Is there such a thing as ‘good’ evaluation – or aesthetic judgment – and, if so, what does this entail?

These are complex issues, and even if we limit ourselves to a psychological perspective, the answers are not obvious. However, what may perhaps be argued is that a ‘good evaluator’ is someone who: (a) has good self-insight concerning his or her own judgment strategy; (b) is able to apply his or her strategy in a consistent manner across cases; (c) shows good temporal stability in repeated ratings of the same stimulus; and (d) is able to minimize all biases and to disregard irrelevant factors in the evaluation context.

What we *cannot* specify, however, is precisely which criteria a ‘good evaluator’ should focus on, or how they should be weighted in the overall judgments. (This was, obviously, the *main* factor influencing agreement among judges in previous studies; e.g., Juslin et al., 2016, 2021). In a way, this is the crux of the matter: even if judges have good self-insight and are as consistent as humanly possible, and if they show temporal stability and can remove all biases and contextual effects, there will *still* be disagreements in aesthetic judgment, simply because even the foremost experts will never agree 100% on a precise set of relevant aesthetic criteria and their relative weighting. In the absence of absolute or universal criteria for aesthetic value, standards of performance evaluation will inevitably be somewhat relative and provisional.

It might be tempting to equate ‘good aesthetic judgment’ with ‘consensus with expert ratings’ (Lundy et al., 2019), though apart from the fact that expert judgments correlate only moderately, there is the problem that those composers that are hailed by today’s critics may well have been



lambasted by experts back in the day. Even in our current time, it is not that unusual for a professional critic to drastically reappraise a music album within just a couple of years. Expert judgment, it seems, is a shaky ground upon which to base any notion of an *absolutely* good judgment.

An alternative approach could be to evaluate judges in terms of whether they are able to apply criteria in accordance with a formal rating scale for performance evaluation (of a music institution, for instance). However, assume that we enforce adherence to a fixed set of criteria and even their relative weightings (to the degree that judges are really able to fully implement those), such that an ‘ideal’ music performance is clearly implied and inter-rater reliability can be maximized: Are the resulting judgments still fully *valid*? Are they still *aesthetic* judgments that reflect music as a *creative* art form?

Fautley and Colwell (2018) noted that some performance aspects (e.g., fingering) can be straightforward to evaluate, whereas other aspects (e.g., whether a performance is musical or original) might involve more difficult judgments. In an attempt to increase reliability, it is all too easy to fall back on criteria that are easily assessable, but that are not necessarily valid in measuring aspects of musical learning (Fautley & Colwell, 2018). As observed by Thompson et al., (1998), “criteria used by examining boards for the assessment of music students may be insufficient for the assessment of performances at the highest level of musicianship” (p. 154).

Allowing for the fact that even experts may take different views on aesthetic values that are, in some sense, equally valid (Levenson, 1987), does a ‘forced-consensus approach’ to the criteria mean that validity is sacrificed to obtain a better estimate of (inter-rater) reliability? If so, is this acceptable or desirable? And if we evaluate performance according to a fixed scale, does this imply that there is only *one* ‘correct’ performance of a work, such that any notion of ‘interpretation’ becomes meaningless? If teachers apply a fixed judgment strategy where they, in effect, ‘teach to the test’, will the resulting (identical) performances appeal to the audience? I do not have the answers to these questions, but I think they deserve reflection and debate.

Findings on aesthetic judgment in music also relate to more practical matters. Thus, for instance, data on what criteria listeners actually rely on most in their judgments of music can have pedagogical implications, for instance, by showing what aspects need specific attention in instrumental teaching. Moreover, the finding that judges tend to have low self-insight (see Section 5) has a crucial implication: If a music teacher’s explicit understanding of how he or she makes aesthetic judgments differs from the way in which he or she actually makes those judgments, the teacher may in effect provide misleading instructions to the student.

In addition, my preliminary observation that the criteria included in formal rating scales (or rubrics) used in by educational institutions may not quite overlap with the criteria used by music listeners or critics raises important questions for music education: What criteria should be used, and on what basis? Gabrielsson (2003) argued that the criteria used in assessment of student performance are dominated by technical aspects (e.g., intonation, rhythmic accuracy). Listeners, in contrast, may emphasize expression, originality and emotion. This is significant since pedagogical documents (including rubrics) serve as models for music performance and guide students. As argued by Gabrielsson (2003), “much work remains to establish adequate criteria for the evaluation of music performance” (p. 257).

Even if educators converge on a more adequate set of criteria, performance evaluation remains a skill; and it seems that few music educators receive any formal training in grading performances (e.g., Waddell et al., 2019). Similarly, the training of musicians does not seem to include systematic knowledge about which criteria music listeners and critics use to rate a performance.

Here, the previously proposed analytic paradigm of Judgment Analysis might come in handy. Idiographic regression models of aesthetic judgments could perhaps help to make the judgment process more *transparent* for music teachers, such that they understand it, and – if needed – might alter specific aspects of it. We found that judges who had greater insight into their own judgments were also more consistent. This suggests the possibility that increasing a judge’s self-insight (e.g., via feedback) may also improve his or her internal consistency.

Winter (1993) reported findings indicating that the training a music examiner receives prior to the performance assessment session may be more important in producing consistent judgments than amount of previous music examining experience. Similarly, McPherson and Schubert (2004) noted that training may be key to alert the evaluator of subconscious biases (for further discussion, see Lundy, 2016). Waddell et al. (2019) presented a novel tool, “The Evaluation Simulator”, to study and train performance evaluation by means of an immersive virtual environment. Our lab has found that computer feedback based on multiple regression models might enhance a performer’s communication of emotions (e.g., Juslin et al., 2006). It seems plausible that one can develop similar performance-enhancing computer interventions that involve feedback based on models of aesthetic judgments.

Understanding the process of assessment is, arguably, a key to enhancing one’s musical performance (McPherson & Schubert, 2004). Hence, Duke and Byo (2018) suggested that the goal of instrumental teaching should be not only to change each learner’s performance for the better, but also to change each learner’s *perception* of her own performance: “if learners must rely on the teacher to indicate what sounds good and what does not, and what needs to happen next after every performance trial, then there is little that learners can do on their own time in individual practice” (p. 9). To enhance this process of aesthetic judgment might be one of the most valuable contributions researchers can make towards the goal of helping music students to develop their full potential as music performers.

*Uppsala University, Sweden*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leech-Wilkinson (2006) explains that “a prominent note in a score that in 1910 was emphasized by sliding up to it from the note below, in 1950 might have been emphasized by vibrating on it, and in 1990 by increasing and decreasing its amplitude” (p. 60). Though the inclination to emphasize certain notes remains constant, the means to achieve this differ. Thus “almost every aspect of performance style has changed over the past century” (p. 42).

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# Cover Versions: Ethics, Appropriation, and Expertise

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JEANETTE BICKNELL

**Abstract:** Ethical issues arise when musicians perform and record “cover” versions of songs. In this paper I discuss performances of Blues music by professional musicians who do not have strong cultural ties to this material. I begin with a discussion of musical authenticity and appropriation, and then discuss some of the surrounding ethical issues, drawing on James O. Young’s defense of profound cultural offense. Could harm arise from cross-cultural musical covers, and if so, is this harm always a relevant consideration for musicians? What do musicians owe to people who came before them and upon whose cultural traditions they are building?

**Keywords:** Blues, musical performance, popular music, cultural appropriation, ethical issues in performance, James O. Young, authenticity in music

In this paper I discuss some of the ethical issues that arise when musicians perform and record “cover” versions of songs. Covers have been defined in various ways.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I will understand “cover versions” or “covers” to be recordings and performances of traditional and popular songs that have already been recorded by (and may be strongly associated with) other musicians. I will be particularly interested in cover versions of Blues songs, and I will further restrict my inquiry to musicians who perform for others and accept compensation for doing so. I make this restriction because I do not believe that fully amateur musicians (those who do not perform for audiences or perform only for friends and families) have the same duties – to audiences and to themselves – as do professional musicians.

The Blues originated as a form of African American folk music. Performances by musicians who are not part of that tradition might be considered inauthentic, or even condemned as a morally problematic form of cultural appropriation. There is an unfortunate history of white musicians covering songs first recorded by Black artists soon after they were released. These “white” versions, rather than the original versions, would be played on radio stations and made available in juke boxes. The result was that Black artists were marginalized, with little financial reward or recognition for their contributions.<sup>2</sup> With time (and in a few cases, legal actions), many of the white popular musicians who built their careers by performing Blues and Blues-inspired music came to acknowledge the African American musical and cultural traditions which inspired them.

Clearly, Blues covers raise a number of ethical issues and I will touch upon several of them in this paper. We usually (but not invariably) think of ethical violations as causing harm. Could harm potentially arise from cross-cultural musical covers, and if so, is this harm always a relevant consideration for musicians? What do we owe to people who came before us and upon whose cultural traditions we are building? This question has wider implications beyond music, but music is a good place to start thinking about them. What does it mean to acknowledge a predecessor, and what are the implications if that “predecessor” is not an individual but an entire cultural tradition? Do our moral commitments change if the tradition to which we are indebted is not one in which we grew up? Finally, traditions develop and change, in both positive and negative ways. It is no easy matter to say when a tradition has been degraded and when it has simply changed. That said, does a band that calls itself a “Blues” band have a duty to faithfully represent the shared musical practices that have come to be associated with Blues music?

There are no easy answers to these questions. My aim in this paper is to continue the conversation by raising issues and offering some possibilities for consideration.

### **Authenticity and Appropriation**

In any discussion of performance and race the topics of authenticity and cultural appropriation quickly arise. Joel Rudinow's seminal article, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" is still germane.<sup>3</sup> In this influential paper, Rudinow characterizes authenticity as the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source. He argues that the authenticity of a Blues performance turns on the performer's expertise. Rather than consider the performer's ethnicity, instead look to his or her degree of mastery of the idiom, including but not limited to technical mastery. Evidence that the performers has mastered the idiom can be sought "in and around the performance" for the performer's recognition and acknowledgment of indebtedness to sources of inspiration and technique.

Let me present a hypothetical example to better motivate the discussion. I give you Etienne – a fan of Blues music as well as an amateur musician. He is a decent singer and fairly accomplished on the keyboard. Etienne grew up and lives in Europe. He has no cultural or personal connection with American Blacks besides his appreciation of Blues music. Etienne is not a native English speaker and does his best to understand obscure references in song lyrics.

Let's further imagine that Etienne has a group of like-minded friends who are also amateur musicians. They all work in their respective careers and perform together as a Blues band during their spare time. The name of their band includes the word "Blues." They play in bars, community centres, outdoor festivals, and at private events. They make a little money doing this – probably enough to cover the band's expenses, with some extra for refreshments. Their repertoire is made up of traditional Blues songs like "Sweet Home Chicago" and "Dust my Broom." They also cover Blues material made famous by rock musicians, such as Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton.

Etienne and his friends are mid-level amateur musicians. Etienne himself projects a charismatic stage presence as the lead performer. Yet despite their efforts, the band does not actually sound very "bluesy." In fact, all their songs sound more or less the same. They play everything with a "driving" beat more appropriate to different musical styles. The groove in the Blues should be laid-back or before the beat.<sup>4</sup> Instead they play directly on the beat or even rush ahead of the beat, making them sound more like a rock and roll band than like a Blues band. In addition, there is little musical interplay between the singer and the other musicians, or between the lyrical content and the music.

While Etienne and his band are hypothetical, they resemble actual "Blues" bands throughout the world, playing in local music festivals and in bars and pubs. Some of them are excellent amateur musicians who acknowledge and do their best to raise awareness of African American cultural traditions that inspired their music. However other such musicians give me the impression that they first got to know the Blues repertoire through recordings made by British, (white) American, and European rock artists, and they now cannot hear the music in any other way. Whether or not any of them have explored earlier recordings by African American artists, they too seldom seem to have been inspired by such recordings or to have integrated them into their own performance practices.

Etienne and his friends clearly do not meet the criteria that Rudinow has suggested for a performance to be authentic. This is not because they are White Europeans but because they have not (yet) attained a high enough level of mastery over the Blues idiom. I refer here to both the musical elements of the Blues (its typical rhythmic patterns) and the cultural aspects (their lack of acknowledgement to African American traditions.) To listeners familiar with the Blues, Etienne and his friends simply do not sound authentic.

While the question of authenticity is in this case easily settled, I would like to raise a further question. How should the music-making of Etienne and his friends (and their real-life counterparts) be considered from an ethical point of view?



### Appropriation and Ethics

One of the most important considerations in thinking about the ethical implications of our actions is any harm that they may cause. If an act causes harm, then there is at least a *prima facie* reason for thinking that it might be morally wrong. Are Etienne and his friends causing harm by offering mediocre performances of Blues standards? Let's start with potential direct harm to real individuals.

If Etienne and his friends were being hired over better African American musicians, then I would argue their performances cause harm in that they perpetuate economic injustice. And if they did cause harm in this way, then I would argue that the band's performances were at least morally problematic, if not wrong. However, cover bands such as Etienne's typically perform in a geographic and economic niche where they are among the few musicians available for hire who perform Blues covers in public settings. Their work does not displace unionized professionals or better African American musicians. In fact I would venture that if the people who hire bands like Etienne's were able to find better musicians, or musicians with stronger cultural ties to the Blues, they would hire them instead. A lack of competition allows Etienne and his friends to dominate the Blues scene in their niche. Their performances do not harm the economic interests of other musicians who can play in a more authentic manner, and so are not morally problematic for this reason (although there may be other reasons.)

Are audiences harmed if they develop a skewed, unfavourable idea of the Blues from listening to Etienne and his friends? If performers contribute to misinformation about musical traditions, then there is at least some reason to consider their performances morally problematic. However I doubt this is happening here. The people who go to hear Etienne's band and those like them are probably already familiar with the Blues genre and with specific songs. They also have access to much better Blues performances through recordings. I trust that the audience is smart enough to realize that Etienne and his friends are not professionals, have little evident cultural connection to the Blues, and that perhaps better Blues performances might be found elsewhere.

It would seem that Etienne and his friends (and their real-life counterparts) do not directly cause harm, and so there is little *prima facie* reason for thinking that their hobby of performing the Blues might be morally problematic. However the harm that may arise from our actions is not always immediately evident or easily traced. I would further argue (against proponents of Utilitarian ethics) that an act might be morally problematic even if it does not cause harm. Setting aside these complications about ethical theory, I would like to explore the idea that, even if musicians do not cause direct harm (either by harming particular individuals or by contributing to harmful states of affairs) their performances might nonetheless be morally problematic.

### In Defense of Appropriation?

I turn here to the work of James Young on profound offense and cultural appropriation.<sup>5</sup> Young distinguishes harm from offense. While he understands "harm" as a setback to one's interests, "offense" is a negative state of mind. A person who is offended experiences some level of outrage, disgust, or dismay. "Profound" offenses are those that strike at a person's "core values or sense of self."<sup>6</sup> Young acknowledges that the distinction between harm and offense is only approximate, as certain offended states can hinder an individual's interests.

It is not beyond question that a listener might be profoundly offended by the sound of inauthentic Blues. A Blues aficionado – someone who has spent a lot of time seeking out genuine Blues, has taken steps to understand its cultural traditions, and who supports more authentic musicians when possible – could be offended by an inept Blues performance that tries to pass itself off as the genuine article. However the Blues aficionado's "offense" is more likely to be aesthetic than moral, or as much aesthetic as moral. The situation changes if our Blues aficionado has strong cultural ties to Blues music. In such a case, an inept performance purporting to be authentic might indeed insult his or her sense of self. Young's work is fruitful for me even if the offense caused by Etienne and his friends is less

than profound. The argument for hard cases should apply equally to weaker cases. If profoundly offensive acts can be excused, then it should follow that the same defense should apply to “mildly” offensive acts.

Young argues that artists do not inevitably act wrongly when they produce artworks that are a source of profound cultural offense. He offers two reasons in support of this conclusion. The first is straightforwardly Utilitarian. A work of art that some find profoundly offensive might nonetheless provide social utility or value. As examples, Young cites the musician Paul Simon and the composer Steve Reich. Both have had artistic success drawing on different elements of African musical traditions, and in doing so enriched the lives of many music fans. When the social value of an artwork outweighs the offense that caused by cultural appropriation, we have a reason to think that the cultural appropriation is not wrong.<sup>7</sup>

The second reason is also broadly Utilitarian, but the benefit accrues to the artists in question rather than to society more generally. Young writes that the creation of an artwork might be “essential” to an individual’s self-realization. Furthermore, artists often use their work to understand “matters that they find to be of pressing importance.” When they do so – when artists act in good faith, in response to a compelling imperative, produce artworks in pursuit of self-realization and disinterested inquiry – they do not act wrongly.<sup>8</sup> They are not morally blameworthy, even if these works are a source of profound offense. To put it another way, (some) artists get a moral “pass” because the creation of art is (at least sometimes) a privileged form of expression.

The argument from social utility seems plausible but has some odd implications. It seems that cultural appropriation is fine for Paul Simon but not necessarily for Etienne. This conclusion is troubling, because we usually hold that the same moral rules apply to everyone unless there is a morally relevant difference between them. Police officers in the course of their duty are morally permitted to do things that an ordinary citizen is not, because being charged with enforcing the law is a morally relevant difference. We might agree to give some individuals a benefit that is denied to others, because we deem their life circumstances to provide a morally relevant difference. Is artistic skill a morally relevant difference, such that the same act is approved if carried out by an accomplished artist but not by a mediocre artist? The thought that this might be correct is at least a little discomfiting. For one, this claim invites us to excuse or explain away moral transgressions by successful artists. For another, it puts a greater moral burden on less skilled artists when we might ordinarily believe that the reverse should hold, and artists whose work has the potential to reach a larger audience have the heavier moral burden.

Despite these hesitations, I think that the argument from social utility is helpful here. There is something special about hearing a live band, even an amateur band. There is even something special about hearing an amateur band that is not particularly good. I invite readers to think about their own experiences. What I have noticed is that even when the band is only passable, listeners tend to recognize the tunes being played, dance, and generally enjoy themselves. Etienne and his friends, despite their musical and moral shortcomings, are adding to the sum-total of joy in the world.

Young’s second defense of offensive cultural appropriation is that artistic expression is privileged when artists create works in service of self-realization or disinterested inquiry. Young implies, and I think most would agree, that a person’s intentions are a significant factor in assessing the morality of their actions. There is a significant moral difference between someone who punches another person in a pique of anger, and someone who punches another person in self defense or to protect a vulnerable third party. Of course, intention is only one factor among many in assessing the morality of actions, and not necessarily always the most significant factor. Certainly, it is not enough, from a moral point of view, to have good intentions.

Young’s second line of defense also gives rise to uncomfortable implications. To illustrate what I mean, I must introduce you to another cover band. Katerina and her band play weddings, parties, casinos, and corporate gigs in and around a major city. They are paid to play, and the musicians earn enough that playing in the band provides some of their income in addition to covering the band’s

expenses. Katerina's band does not present itself as a Blues band, although they will play Blues if asked. In fact, they will play almost anything if asked. If a client requests a song that they do not already know, they will learn it and perform it for that client. Katerina's band can learn new music without too much effort because each member plays at a high level. All make at least part of their income from music, whether as pick-up musicians for other bands, studio players, music teachers, or sound engineers.

When Katerina and her band play Blues covers, it has nothing to do with self-realization or disinterested inquiry. The band plays songs that the audience wants to hear, even when the material is not particularly challenging for them or gratifying to play, and they do so with conviction. You would never know that Katerina dislikes a particular song from the way she performs it. Like Etienne's band, Katerina's band plays to please their audience. They strive to do so out of a sense of professionalism, and also because it makes sense from a business point of view. Katerina's band competes for bookings with other similarly skilled musicians, and a significant amount of the work they get is due to referrals from happy customers. If they are booked less frequently, it will mean a loss of income. Hence Katerina's band has more of an incentive than Etienne's band to make sure that their audiences have a good time.

Etienne and Katerina are both motivated by the desire to please their audience. Etienne is also motivated by sincere (if misguided) appreciation for the Blues. They are happy to be paid for performing, but that is not their main objective. Katerina and her colleagues are not motivated by disinterested inquiry, nor by a desire for self-realization. The Blues is just one of the many genres they have mastered. It would seem, according to Young, that Katerina's band is more vulnerable to the charge of wrongful cultural appropriation than is Etienne's band. Yet at the same time Katerina's band provides greater social utility than Etienne's, which would seem to make their appropriation of the Blues and other musical traditions to be less morally problematic. So Young's two lines of defense pull against each other.

### **Appropriation and the Debt to Sources of Inspiration**

When musicians appropriate the music of another culture, what do they owe to the individuals and cultures who have inspired them? This is a difficult question, and it might be easiest to start with what they do *not* owe. I would argue that they do not owe fidelity to the past nor to the way things have been done in the past. First, the demand to be faithful to the past is difficult even to formulate coherently. Faithful to which aspect of the past? Traditions are not monolithic. They develop and change over time. Attempts to be faithful to the past risk being arbitrary. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If a musician wants to make it their life work to recreate the music of a particular place in a particular era, there is nothing wrong with such a project. However a self-imposed personal project should not be mistaken for a general ethical injunction.

Turning to positive duties, I would argue that there are three duties related to "covering" or performing music of a tradition to which one does not personally belong. They are: the duty not to misrepresent that tradition; the duty to acknowledge the inspiration provided by the tradition; and (in some circumstances) the duty to promote the tradition.

Musicians have a duty not to misrepresent the traditions that have inspired them. My formulation of this duty as negative – *not to* misrepresent rather than to represent accurately or faithfully – is intentional. As I said above, "faithful" or "accurate" representation is not an appropriate general directive. At the same time, a musical tradition can only be modified so much before it is transformed into something else. This is not necessarily a bad thing but a part of the normal evolution of musical styles and genres. The line between "acceptable stylistic innovation within a tradition" and "new genre" is generally worked out by musicians and fans over time.<sup>9</sup>

The duty not to misrepresent musical traditions is related to the prior duty of musical competence. (Once again, I'm speaking about musicians who perform for others, and primarily of those who do so for financial compensation. The duties of amateur musicians are not as stringent.) The duty to be

competent in a particular style goes beyond the established duty to oneself, to other musicians, and to audiences to play competently. Someone who is not yet competent in a particular musical style should be cautious about performing in it, to avoid the possibility of misrepresenting the tradition. There is a difference, for example, between a poor performance of a personal composition and a poor performance that purports to be Blues, as the latter might cause listeners to form a negative impression of the Blues. If performers are competent and want to make creative innovations within the tradition, they should be clear that this is what they are doing. This responsibility is not unique to Blues performances. Similar duties would hold for performers of gamelan or Zydeco music.

The duty of acknowledgement is related to our larger duty of gratitude. Generally speaking, one should not attempt to pass off as a completely original production something that has been inspired and nurtured by others. I would argue that the duty of acknowledgment and giving credit where due is an established (although perhaps not explicitly documented) ethical norm among musicians. In interviews and talks, professional musicians in every genre tend to speak with gratitude about their teachers, their musical influences, and those who inspired them.

Finally, musicians have a duty to promote the traditions that have informed their musical practice. This might be as simple as telling listeners where they can hear more of a particular musician or style of music. Highly successful musicians have correspondingly greater duties. What the cover band at my local bar owes to its musical predecessors is certainly less than what the Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin owe.

The objection might arise that asking musicians to acknowledge and promote the traditions that have inspired them is asking them to do something *extra*-musical. If gratitude, say, cannot be conveyed through musical sound alone (or in “the music itself”), then to ask it of musicians is misplaced. However this objection rests on a flawed conception of music. I have argued elsewhere that the nature of music is fundamentally social, and that even solitary listening to music is best conceived of as a social phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Let me elaborate: Music is created by human beings, usually for the benefit of other human beings. (Even in the very few cultures where unmediated natural sound can be considered music, the grouping of natural sound with song or instrumental music is a social convention.) The transmission of music from one generation to the next begins very early in life, as we can see through the universal practice of singing children to sleep, and the cross-cultural phenomenon of special musical repertoires for children. Even musicians who are self-taught must rely on other human beings (or recordings of them) to grasp how their instruments are supposed to sound, not to mention how to make sounds into a musical work.

All of this is to say that a musical performance is not limited to the sounds made by musicians. Performances are social events and encompass the performers’ interactions with the audience, including introductions, remarks about the music being performed, and ad-lib exchanges among band members and with the audience. The communication between a musician (especially, popular musicians) and their audience is not limited to what is said from the stage. It also includes what is conveyed in media interviews, statements to the press and (in the present day) postings on social media. All of this give plenty of opportunity for musicians to acknowledge their debts to the musical traditions that have inspired them, and to promote those traditions.<sup>11</sup>

### Final Thoughts

Would it be better, from an ethical point of view, for Etienne and his friends to play some other kind of music, or not to perform at all? To put the issue in its starkest form, might they have a *duty* to refrain from playing Blues covers, despite their evident pleasure in performing?

I would say no. As I argued above, Etienne’s band, despite its shortcomings, is performing a useful social function by sharing their love of music. However it does not follow that musicians such as Etienne have no further ethical responsibilities. It is not easy to specify (let alone quantify) what musicians who perform the Blues owe to their African American predecessors. But that does not

mean that they owe nothing. Whatever the debt, it might not be obvious how performers might begin to discharge it. But that does not mean that they should do nothing.

Judging by their performances, the hypothetical Etienne and his friends (as well as many non-hypothetical musicians) could and should do more in this respect.<sup>12</sup>

Toronto, Canada

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See for example Michael Rings, "Doing it Their Way: Rock Covers, Genre, and Appreciation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71:1 (2013), 55–63; and P.D. Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, Open Book Publishers, 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> For one discussion of these issues, see Denise Oliver Velez, "Black people create, white people profit: The racist history of the music industry." Available at: <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/6/14/1948464/-Black-people-create-white-people-profit-The-racist-history-of-the-music-industry>. Accessed on July 2, 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:1 (1994), 127–37.
- <sup>4</sup> See Tiger C. Roholt, *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> James Young, "Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:2 (2005), 135–146.
- <sup>6</sup> Young, 135. Young draws here on Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, vol. 2, *Offense to Others* (Oxford University Press, 1985).
- <sup>7</sup> Young, 139.
- <sup>8</sup> I read Young here as meaning artists do not act wrongly when the works they produce are in pursuit of either 1) self-realization; or 2) disinterested inquiry. Arguably an artist could not coherently pursue both aims in the same work, as self-realization is not disinterested.
- <sup>9</sup> See Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton University Press, 2012).
- <sup>10</sup> See my *Why Music Moves Us* (Palgrave MacMillan), 2015, chapter six.
- <sup>11</sup> See also Jeanette Bicknell, "Reflections on John Henry: Ethical Issues in Singing Performance," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67:2 (March 2009): 173–80.
- <sup>12</sup> I am grateful to participants and co-panelists in the American Society for Aesthetics 2022 Virtual Summer Aesthetics Festival panel on the Ethics of Covers, and especially to Evan Malone and P.D. Magnus for sharing their forthcoming paper, "The Ethics of Cover Songs." For discussion and comments on earlier drafts I thank Ian Jarvie, Jennifer Judkins and Justin London.

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# A Blues Aesthetic: Performance Practice, Politics, and History

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JULIA SIMON

**Abstract:** Blues has been used as a term to designate a broad musical category, in addition to an aesthetic that includes the visual arts and literature. Reasserting the significance of the blues as a form of Black vernacular music grounds the idea of a blues aesthetic in both a specific history and a performance practice. The genre was shaped by racialized socio-economic conditions that influenced its formal and stylistic components. As a key feature of the blues, repetition delimits a field of creative activity. Despite formal and stylistic constraints, the blues models resistance to domination aesthetically, as the genre challenges the idea of the work of art as a fixed product. Valorizing process, the blues models a practice of resistance to domination using repetition with a difference as a form of agency.

**Keywords:** blues, performance practice, Black vernacular music, Charley Patton, B. B. King

The blues understood as a Black vernacular musical genre is a capacious category. The word designates a wide range of musical performance styles and practices extending from rural non-professionalized forms, often with geographical descriptors, such as Delta, Piedmont, and Texas, to urban incarnations with their own geographical designations, such as Chicago, Memphis, Kansas City, or West Coast. “Blues” also sometimes references formal or stylistic characteristics of tone, rhythm, scale or mode, and lyric structure. This broader usage invokes a category of music that extends to other genres: rag, popular song in Black vaudeville, jazz, soul, blues rock, et cetera, raising questions about genre boundaries. Indeed, the setting of genre boundaries for the blues has spurred numerous debates focused on formal attributes, composition practices, performance techniques, as well as the music’s social function, prompting polemics about “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” among scholars and critics. Beyond music, “blues” has been used to designate a particular Black aesthetic that encompasses the visual arts and literature. As Richard Powell (1989) argues, when applied to visual art and literature, the “blues aesthetic” conjures artistic “work that identifies with grassroots, popular, and/or mass black American culture” (23).

If a specific African American vernacular musical form lends its name to a broader aesthetic, it is for particular reasons. Clyde Woods (2017) posits a “blues epistemology” grounded in a specific racialized, historical, geographical, socio-economic context: “working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South have constructed a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements. They have created their own ethno-regional epistemology” (16). For Woods, “The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it. The Mississippi Delta is the home of the blues tradition in music, popular culture, and explanation . . .” (25).<sup>1</sup> For Woods, the “blues epistemology” refers to a critical interpretive stance that generates a sometimes aestheticized counter-discourse informed by specific racialized economic conditions.

In keeping with the general theme of this volume, I want to shift the conversation about a “blues aesthetic” away from broad categories to focus on musical practices. I will argue that the blues as a



performance practice is grounded in the specific historical context out of which the genre emerged. In this respect, I agree with Woods's linking of an aesthetic with an epistemology or even ontology arising from specific historical conditions.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of a blues aesthetic as opposed to an epistemology, I draw the historical boundary at the moment of the emergence of "blues" music, in the post-Reconstruction landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the nadir of race relations in the United States. Developing an aesthetic out of performance practice for the blues entails acknowledging the historically-rooted critical interpretive perspective to which it gives voice lyrically and instrumentally. It also requires teasing out the underlying principles embedded in formal and stylistic attributes of the music. In other words, working from performance practice toward a musical aesthetic entails extrapolating from a historicized understanding of the genre, including its stylistic, formal, and technical features.

Such an approach is consistent with the way in which many blues performers understand their craft. As the guitarist John Cephas, half of the acoustic duo Cephas & Wiggins, explains, "Musicians seldom speak of an aesthetic as such; that is, they don't often use that word. But they do talk about what they do, what it's about, and how they do it. They see the blues as a system connected to the oral black tradition, sharing qualities with other types of vocal and instrumental music and dealing with subjects common to the black community" (Powell 1989, 15).

Ultimately, the focus on performance practice signals an understanding of the aesthetic object as sound. This is especially true for the blues and other vernacular musical traditions where there is no written score to privilege above any particular performance of a song. The work of art is the music; which is to say, that performances—live or recorded—are the object of study. Any aesthetic grounded in performance practice must account for music as sounding process: an inherently unstable and ephemeral series of sonic articulations that unfolds in time. As I will argue, this aesthetic process has political implications.

### 1. Historical Context

Determining a historical time and place of origin for the blues poses significant problems related back to the capacious nature of the genre designation. Ideological stakes exert pressure on the conception of a Black vernacular form. Much early criticism—and commercial recording, as Miller (2010, 187–240) has argued—was informed by folkloric assumptions about "purity" and "authenticity" linked to Romanticism. This conception of "folk" music rejected "professionalized" forms, including Black vaudeville, tented shows, and sheet music, in favor of "spontaneous" composition, traditional verses, and particular lyrical themes performed in rural locales, as indications of the "authenticity" of the music.<sup>3</sup> Collection by folklorists tended to privilege sites with majority African American populations in specific socio-economic conditions, such as plantations and prisons.<sup>4</sup> Motivated by left-leaning politics, this initial work aimed to recognize an aesthetic form rendered largely invisible to the white dominant culture. Paradoxically, the focus on hyper-segregated contexts and concern with mediation by white culture also reified fluid boundaries in terms of artistic repertoire. Many Black artists were discouraged from recording popular and religious songs.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the folkloricist focus on "purity" and "authenticity," understood as distance from "professionalized" forms mediated by capitalism, policed the boundaries of the genre. Ironically, the conception of "folk" music and its attendant collection practices de-historicized and thereby fixed an inherently unstable form of music with porous boundaries. The focus on a certain conception of "purity" edited out evidence of contact with "modernity" in one part of the blues archive.<sup>6</sup>

More recent criticism has acknowledged the emergence of music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the formal and stylistic attributes associated with the "blues" in a multitude of Southern settings: urban, semi-urban, rural, under tents, in Black vaudeville, as well as on porches, at picnics, and in rural jukes. This work highlights the "segregating of sound" (Miller 2010) that occurred in early commercial recordings, as well as the gender bias operated by the exclusion of the

“professional” venues and their performers (McGinley 2014, 7–9).<sup>7</sup> Across these contexts, it is the formal and stylistic features of the music that determine its designation as “blues.” Peter C. Muir’s (2010) study of songs published from 1912 to 1920 with “blues” in the title or subtitle establishes axes of classification to indicate a spectrum of features ranging from “folk blues” to Tin Pan Alley songs, setting up the contours of a broad field (38–48). Antiphonal structure, pentatonic scale, blue notes, 3-line verse form, and lyrical themes of “having the blues” create a web of family resemblance that roughly designates the emerging genre of music across “folk” and “professional” contexts. However, the features themselves are not anodyne; they should be read as signs of Woods’ blues epistemology. Historical conditions shape aesthetic forms.

Aesthetic modes do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Music genres and subgenres develop over time, shaped by material circumstances (such as the availability of instruments, technological capabilities, and the socio-economic conditions of the musicians and their listening publics), as well as types of musical knowledge (such as the ability to read music, play certain instruments, and manipulate technology) and, eventually, modes of dissemination. They also emerge in relation to prior musical traditions. In the case of the blues, the folklorists were not wrong in privileging certain spaces. Work songs and spirituals dating back to slavery, as well as seculars, ballads, and hollers, provided a sound palette from which to create the “blues” (Barlow 1989, 8–20). These earlier musical practices were better preserved in situations of hyper-segregation, oppression, and exploitation that closely recreated conditions of gang labor under slavery. Focusing on plantations and prisons highlighted the musical continuity between earlier Black vernacular musical forms and the blues and also the continuity between racialized labor regimes under slavery and in the New South. In this respect, blues music as a manifestation of the “blues epistemology” critiques the lack of progress made by African Americans across the rural Jim Crow South, in part through its retention of features reminiscent of music under slavery.

The formal and stylistic resemblances between the blues and earlier hollers, spirituals, work songs, and seculars—antiphonal structure, a tonal system with “pitch areas” (Evans 2005, 84), and a repeating chord pattern—resonate with sounding practices under slavery, but in a specific post-Reconstruction context. Beyond the musical continuity, the blues also reflect the racialized, socio-economic conditions of the rural Jim Crow South in other ways. As I argue in *Time in the Blues* (2017), the sense of temporality in the blues bears the traces of experiences of time under the exploitative racialized labor regimes of sharecropping, tenancy, and convict lease, where the yearly cycle of debt immobilized a workforce (35–46). Lyrics deploy romantic and sexual relations to signify socio-economic conditions, often narrating the discovery of betrayal. The realization often leads to the desire for a break with the past as a result of the new awareness of victimization. However, a limited ability to project into the future forecloses the possibility of enacting meaningful change and restricts the sense of agency. Narrators often imagine “going away to leave” or that “someday, things will be different”—as in the traditional blues line “the sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday”—without articulating a path forward.<sup>8</sup> With only tenuous links to the past and a vague imagining of the near-future, the temporal features of the blues expressed in the formal structure, lyrics, and instrumental performances focus attention on dwelling in the present (Simon 2017, 18–20, 22). The prevalence of repetition in the blues—in lyrical structure, chord progression, recycling of lyrics and riffs, et cetera—reinforces the emphasis on the present moment, evoking a feeling of being trapped. Repetition resonates with the lack of change in both material and socio-economic conditions, dampening any feeling of progress. In this respect, the “immediacy” and “spontaneity” that characterize the instrumental and vocal performance practices of the blues represent responses to forces that bore down on a population in semi-bondage. The privileging of the present moment is part of the sublimation into a powerful aesthetic form of these circumstances that both limit and enable agency. The formal characteristics of the blues not only echo a musical past of slavery, but also critically reflect on a contemporary situation of on-going bondage.

## 2.1. Performance Practice

The emphasis on the present moment in blues performance practice highlights one of the underlying paradoxes of the aesthetic. Despite the fixed form of the AA'B verse structure, repeating chord progression, and the use and re-use of commonly-held lyrics and riffs, the genre stresses musical art as inherently unstable process. The folklorist critical insistence on composition practices among "folk" blues artists highlights instability, even at the level of the "song." David Evans (1982) writes,

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to speak of folk blues as "songs" in the usual sense. Instead of repertoires of blues songs, we must often deal with *outputs of blues performances*. Many blues singers do not learn or compose blues at some particular point in time and then repeat them the same way in all subsequent performances. Instead, each blues performance often produces a new song, one that may never again be performed by the singer. In such cases, composition and performance are identical and inseparable. (111)

While this composition-performance practice does not accurately describe the work of non-"folk" artists like T-Bone Walker and B. B. King, who employed horn sections with pre-arranged parts, or artists with consistent performances across takes, like Robert Johnson and Memphis Minnie,<sup>9</sup> it nonetheless captures an essential aspect of blues performance. Any particular performance of a song stands not as a copy of a canonized studio version that functions as a norm (like performance in relation to the written score in other genres), but rather represents one instantiation as part of a living process. The principle of repetition with a difference grounds an aesthetic enacted in and through performance. As Albert Murray (1976) emphasizes, this constant variety is not a result of sloppiness or lack of technique, but rather should be understood as a form of "musical nuance" that requires "verbal" and "musical precision" (79).<sup>10</sup> In discussing musical practice in the blues, Murray develops the notions of play:

Blues musicians play music not only in the theatrical sense that actors play or stage a performance, but also in the general sense of playing for recreation, as when participating in games of skill. They also play in the sense of gamboling, in the sense that is to say, of fooling around or kidding around with, toying with, or otherwise having fun with. Sometimes they also improvise and in the process they elaborate, extend, and refine. But what they do in all instances involves the technical skill, imagination, talent, and eventually the taste that adds up to artifice. (87)

Repetition with a difference in the immediacy of the present moment founds a performance aesthetic in which the work of art is understood as ephemeral process rather than fixed product. The degree of spontaneity in the blues may differ among sub-genres, but "play" in Murray's sense is crucial to the aesthetic.

## 2.2. Performances: Charley Patton and B. B. King

While nearly all blues performances entail some degree of spontaneity, the Delta blues exhibit a high degree of the composition-performance practice described by Evans (1989), even when recorded. As John Fahey (1970) in his study of Charley Patton notes, "the folk-artist in a recording studio, isolated from the audience to which he is accustomed, is in an 'artificial' situation. The artist is told to make as few mistakes as possible, to watch for the red light on the wall since his performance can last no more than four (*sic*) minutes. He is told that he will be paid, but that he will be paid 'per accepted selections' only" (8).<sup>11</sup> The constraints of the recording process exert pressures on performers that tend to inhibit spontaneity. The emphasis on the finished product introduces commercial concerns that distance the music captured on disc from live performance practice. In this respect, the capitalist interests of the white dominant culture mediate access to the "folk" form. But while the "artificiality" of the studio setting likely altered Patton's performance practice, his 1929 and 1930 sides with Paramount manage to capture and freeze a feeling of process. Listeners hear features of Patton's guitar and vocal style and composition practice fixed in recording and interpret them as signs of "spontaneity."

What is heard as “spontaneity” or “unfinished process” is partially conditioned by expectations about what a finished piece of music sounds like. Evans (1993) catalogs the features of Patton’s recorded output that he interprets as exhibiting this unfinished quality:

His voice was tough and raw, suggesting a rough-and-tumble life and a barely suppressed rage. *Though he had a superb touch on the guitar and mastery of the subtleties of tone and timing, he often liked to snap and bend the strings and slide a knife over them to produce percussive and whining effects.* . . . He often accented normally weak syllables and words of secondary importance for the song’s meaning in order to give full weight to every part of his performance. He delivered a spoken commentary on many of his songs, seeming to create his own audience and context even in the recording studio. Although he drew heavily on the storehouse of traditional blues verses, many of his lyrics had a startling originality and contained highly personal references. His recordings had an extremely spontaneous quality, always seeming to be songs still in the making, never finished products delivered by the artist for the final embalming in shellac. One seems to be hearing Charley Patton at that very moment working on his musical repertoire, engaged in a high-energy process of reshaping and reworking. (43, emphasis added)

In the highlighted sentence, Evans implies, with his concessive “though,” that guitar techniques specific to the Delta blues, for example, string snapping and playing with a slide, are signs of a lack of subtlety with respect to tone and timing. For Evans, these techniques, in opposition to an imagined performance of subtle “mastery,” signal spontaneity. In truth, string snapping and slide work require the musical nuance and precision that Murray (1976) highlights. However, in other musical aesthetics, the sounds these techniques produce—often described as “dirty tones”—are deemed undesirable and are even deliberately avoided.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the spoken commentary, syllabic emphasis, and vocal “noise” (Malawey 2020, 105–106) in Patton’s recordings are also part of a blues aesthetic (Jung 2002, 147), although they may be heard by listeners unfamiliar with the tradition as lacking in terms of technique, particularly in relation to other recorded music of the late 1920s. In this respect, specific features of this subgenre of music are read as signs of “folk” spontaneity.

Patton’s “Down the Dirt Road Blues” (1929) exhibits many of the techniques that Evans highlights. The idiosyncratic guitar part includes strumming, picking, percussive string-dampening, and a syncopated recurring figure, all within an accelerating tempo. Patton’s “career” as a performer with well-documented stage antics, such as “playing the guitar behind his head or between his legs” (Evans, 1993, 43), provides evidence that he was a well-rehearsed “professional,” putting into question the “spontaneity” of the guitar techniques. The vocal delivery demonstrates Patton’s signature ability to create different voices. His diction in the spoken asides is fairly clear, while the melismatic holds on certain words create diphthong vowels that hinder comprehension. For example, the elongation technique emphasizes the words “away,” “unknown,” and “worried” in the opening verse: “I’m goin’ away to a world unknown [2x] / I’m worried now, but I won’t be worried long.” Like the guitar technique, the variety on display in Patton’s vocal performances indicates control that is likely practiced for maximum effect. Here, the phonetic emphasis generates a semantic field around travel to an unknown destination and the attendant emotional response. Feelings of fear and anxiety are enhanced by aspects of the vocal delivery, including its semi-incomprehensibility.

In the case of “Down the Dirt Road Blues,” the “startling originality” in the lyrics that Evans notes arises from the violence that the lyrics, along with the vocal performance, evoke. While the sequence of lyric verses appears at first glance to be haphazard, contributing to the perception of spontaneous composition, the song more or less coheres around the narrator’s flight “down the dirt road” of the title, perhaps because of betrayal or cheating by his sexual partner (“My rider got somethin’, she’s tryin’ a keep it hid”). The most violent imagery occurs in the third and fifth verses. In the third verse, Patton sings, “I feel like choppin’, chips flyin’ everywhere [2x] / I been to the Nation, Lord, but I couldn’t stay there.” The B line of the verse suggests that the narrator sought asylum with an Indigenous American tribe, perhaps as a result of the violent act symbolized by the “choppin’” in the A lines, but now flees. In the fifth verse, he sings, “Every day seem like murder here / Spoken: My God,

I'm no sheriff / Every day seem like murder here / I'm gonna leave tomorrow; I know you don't bid my care." Overtones of racialized violence haunt the lines. As Adam Gussow (2002) argues,

When Charley Patton sang "Every day seems like murder here," he was singing about the early modern South he knew. The murderers were certainly white: during Patton's teenage years in Sunflower, Mississippi, at least nine blacks were lynched. But the murderers were also black: in two separate stabbings, jealous members of his jook audience almost ended his life. (16)

I would argue that aspects of both the instrumental and vocal performance characteristic of the Delta blues were shaped by and evoke the intensity and anxiety of life under conditions of racialized domination and threatening violence that permeated the Jim Crow South during Patton's lifetime. The aesthetic of "spontaneity" entails sublimating a variety of pressures into a performance practice that calls attention to the present moment through particular sounds and lyrical invocations.

As Evans has documented (1982), Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues" contains lines that appear in the songs of others artists who, like Patton, lived in the Drew, Mississippi area. Although Evans sets up an opposition between Patton's use of "traditional verses" and his "startling originality" and "highly personal references" (1993, 43), any particular artist's articulations may become part of the general stock of lyrics available. Thus, lines from "Down the Dirt Road Blues" occur in songs by Tommy Johnson and Mager Johnson (Evans 1982, 273). Like Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the relationship between *langue* and *parole* (Saussure 1972, 62), each song represents an utterance that feeds the virtual storehouse of signifiers available with respect to both lyrical and instrumental articulations.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, this recycling contributes to the perception of spontaneous composition. Listeners recognize utterances across performances and interpret them as evidence that the singer reaches in the moment and seizes on the familiar, although always delivered with a new twist.<sup>14</sup> While this practice exhibits a degree of spontaneity, it also demonstrates a thorough mastery of a common tradition constantly fed by new articulations.

At the opposite end of the blues stylistic spectrum to Charley Patton lies the urban blues of B. B. King. In an interview with Tom Wheeler, King remarked, "In my room, you'd be surprised at all the things I try, but I never go out on a limb, not onstage, no, no, no. I make enough mistakes without it" (Wheeler 2000, 322). King's use of the word "mistakes" is telling about his attitude with respect to "spontaneity." It is difficult to know how many passages of his "improvised" solos were worked out in advance, but it is safe to assume that he worked from a standard vocabulary and grammar to construct solos in the moment that were more "rehearsed" than "spontaneous." The constraints of pre-arranged charts for his backing ensemble shaped this approach. Influenced by commercial interests and recording studio practices, King leans heavily toward the "professional" end of the blues spectrum.

King's attitude nonetheless reveals an understanding of performance as process: "I learned through these many years of being out there and hoping to get everybody working with me that if you make a mistake, *please* work something into it, so that it's *not* a mistake" (Wheeler 2000, 322). "Mistakes," as King makes clear, can motivate spontaneity. Any articulation, even an inadvertent one, may be developed in the process of playing. But beyond "mistakes," spontaneity is a feature of all live performance. Whether it entails adjustments of tempo, groove, rhythm, attack, dynamics, or melodic and/or harmonic voicing, performers respond in the moment to the play of others—both fellow musicians and audience members.

Even a risk-averse player like King understood the value of spontaneity. His recorded output includes a studio version of a song with a "mistake" that he tellingly chose to release. In response to a question about "a very unusual melody line" (Wheeler 2000, 322) in "Chains and Things" (1970), King revealed his privileging of feeling over accuracy in studio recording:

I made a mistake. Now you're getting all the secrets. My bandleader and I have laughed about it many times, but I made a mistake and hit the wrong note and worked my way out of it. We liked the way it sounded, so we got the arranger to have the strings follow it. They repeat the phrase the way I played it. If you've got a good take going and hit one wrong note, you don't want to stop, so I was in the key



of *A flat*, and when I hit [*hums E, D flat, E flat, E flat*], which is #5, 4, 5, 5, we just got the rest of the band to follow right along. (Wheeler 2000, 322–33)

For most genres of music, the take would have been discarded. King's reference to the arranger writing parts for the strings to give the feeling that the "mistake" was deliberate indicates that the cut employed overdubbing: the strings were recorded after and added to King's track. In other words, the recording was not "live" in the studio. The desire to keep the unusual sequence of notes and work through it represents a key element of a blues aesthetic. Despite the studio technique of layering recorded sound, the song's final version contains an indication of its origin in a kind of "spontaneity."<sup>15</sup> In the end, as in jazz, the conception of the aesthetic object is rooted in performance. What King chose to retain in the recording of "Chains and Things" evidences what Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (1995) identifies as an essential aspect of Black music: "With the *musical* experience, the expectation is that something musical will *happen* in the playing of the music" (97). What "happens" on stage and, here, in the studio is valued above a "polished" (i.e., altered and perfected) finished product.

### 3. Performance Process and Politics

Whether live on stage or in the studio, the blues privileges music as process rather than finished product: the aesthetic object exists in the moment of performance. This has broad implications. Unlike in other genres, in which the written score is understood as the work of art, the blues is first and foremost sound. This conception blurs the boundaries between composition and performance. Moreover, there is no one "composer"—a lone individual responsible for creating the work—nor a unique site or time of origin. A vernacular form, the blues depends on a commonly-held stock of couplets, guitar (and other instrumental) parts, and riffs that are recycled and recreated through the process of performance.

The emphasis on sound troubles questions around the "origin" but also foregrounds the context of reception. If the importance of performers is highlighted with respect to composition, so is the role of listeners. With regard to audience, the blues is part of the broader Black oral tradition that Cephas references (Powell 1989, 15). For critic Charles Keil (1966), the "blues" forms part of African American "entertainment-ritual" culture:

[C]ertain Negro performances, called 'entertaining' by Negroes and whites alike, have an added but usually unconscious ritual significance for Negroes. The ritualists I have in mind are singers, musicians, preachers, comedians, disc jockeys, some athletes, and perhaps a few Negro novelists as well. These entertainers are the ablest representatives of a long cultural tradition—what might be called the soul tradition—and they are all identity experts, so to speak, specialists in changing the joke and slipping the yoke. (15)

The broadness of Keil's conceptual category of the "soul tradition" is evident here, which encompasses a variety of social and artistic spheres. The foundational resemblance lies in the performers' modeling of a strategy of resistance to domination: "changing the joke and slipping the yoke." For Keil, "the word 'ritual' seems more appropriate than 'performance' when the audience is committed rather than appreciative" (164).<sup>16</sup> The repeated act of coming together requires performers and audience members to play a part in an active process. For listeners, a performance is an event that "elevates the expectation and places the hearer in a critical mode" (Floyd 1995, 97). Recalling Woods's (2017) insistence on the critical interpretive stance of the "blues epistemology" (25), music as process requires active engagement from the audience.

Audience response is not only active, engaged, and critical, it is also physical. Listeners move in response to the music. In the case of blues and other forms of Black vernacular music, the word "groove" "describe[s] a band's or a performance's rhythmic feel or character. The term is usually reserved for music that exemplifies a solid, infectious rhythmic feel, that demonstrates what Charlie Keil would call "vital drive"" (Berish 2012, 63).<sup>17</sup> The musicians use tempo, rhythm, and beat to shape the movement of music in time and, therewith, audience response. Listeners tap their feet, clap



their hands, and move their bodies along with the music. In a dialectical dynamic, musicians respond in turn. The common beat or pulse unites musicians and listeners.

The common experience of movement in time has political implications. In the specific case of the blues, the genre's historical context of origin in the New South shapes its resistance to fixity, as well as its privileging of spontaneity. The "working-class African Americans in the Delta and in the Black Belt South" (Woods 2017, 16) who created the form were bound in a variety of labor regimes aimed at immobilizing Black labor. As part of its articulation of a critical stance, the blues aesthetic resists confinement and fixity in favor of an on-going collective process. Music-making is "participatory" in the sense that it functions as a "fulcrum of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance" (Turino 2008, 2). Listing features that occur in blues performance practice, Thomas Turino argues that in participatory music,

since what happens musically depends on individual contributions and interactions in the moment, many of the sonic details of a performance are not, and cannot be, pre-planned. *Open form* refers to music that is open ended and can be repeated for as long as the participants and situation requires. The forms used in participatory music are typically short (i.e., a single rendition of the entire piece may last a minute or less), but the entire form is repeated over and over. Cyclical (*ostinato*) forms, in which the same short repeated melodic-harmonic-rhythmic unit constitutes the basic piece, are common in participatory music, as are short sectional forms. . . . One of the most common stylistic features of participatory music is the emphasis on the heightened repetition of musical material—at the levels of motives, phrases, sections, and the entire form—which is then repeated over and over again for a relatively long time. (37–38)

While not as participatory as some forms documented by Turino, as we have seen, the blues aesthetic privileges spontaneity as well as repetition as part of performance practice. The blues engages musicians and listeners on multiple levels as part of a collective process of identity formation.

The resistance to fixity, confinement, and immobility performs an important dialectic of agency at the heart of the blues aesthetic. Responding to the history of racialized domination from slavery through the Jim Crow regime and beyond, the blues models a form of agency within the bounds of a fixed aesthetic form. The formal constraints that shape artistic production function as aesthetic correlates to the restrictions, inhibitions, and limitations that shape power relations under domination. Most significantly, repetition restricts the field of play. Lines of verse, riffs, and chord progressions repeat and are recycled, setting limits to the modes of action. The emphasis on the present moment serves to further check agency. In this way, formal constraints in the blues resonate with historical modes of domination, as artistic agency is circumscribed by formal and stylistic conventions. But domination invariably meets resistance. Whether organized and large-scale or, more often, ad hoc and local, resistance responds with the tools at hand in a pragmatics of the possible. Everyday modes of resistance under extreme forms of domination enable the exercise of agency without risking violent reprisal (Scott 1985, 33–34). The blues as a genre represents this type of resistance to domination aesthetically. Working within constraints, the blues enacts and models a pragmatic and effective form of resistance by privileging repetition with a difference and spontaneity in the present moment. The A' line deviates from the A line, responses to calls create dialogic tension, every new sequence of chord changes creates a sense of forward movement, and so on. Each new iteration (repetition) creates new possibilities for creative action (difference). Within the confines of the fixed form, creativity and, therefore, agency is possible, both individually and collectively. A blues aesthetic rooted in performance practice demonstrates the possibility for action in the moment that preserves tradition, while simultaneously advancing a politics of incremental and meaningful change over time.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Woods (2007) wrote about the blues as not only a musical tradition, but also “a knowledge system indigenous to the United States that is expressed through an ever-expanding variety of cultural, economic, political and social traditions. Embedded within the blues tradition are highly developed and institutionalized forms of philosophy, political economy, social theory and practice, and geographic knowledge that are dedicated to the realization of global social justice” (49).
- <sup>2</sup> Gilmore (2017) explains in the “Introduction” to the reissue of Woods’s *Development Arrested* (originally published in 1989) that his adviser Edward Soja talked him out of the term “ontology” (xii).
- <sup>3</sup> As a counter to this critical tradition, the work of Abbott and Seroff (2007, 2017) has called attention to the significance of Black Vaudeville and tented shows for the development of the “blues.”
- <sup>4</sup> The scholarship of Paul Oliver, Samuel Charters, Alan Lomax, and David Evans is most influential in this regard.
- <sup>5</sup> Wald (2004) cites an interview with blues pianist Little Brother Montgomery about being restricted to blues in recording, including not being allowed to bring sheet music to sessions (65). Ward and Huber (2018) assert that A&R man Ralph Peer required Black artists to “conform to a much narrower set of stylistic expectations than he demanded of the white roots artists he recorded for hillbilly records series” (170).
- <sup>6</sup> The distancing from modernity goes hand-in-hand with a disdain for “commercialism” among folklorists who subscribed to the Romanticist belief “that folk music was the supreme artistic expression of Man, the higher embodiment of a pure, spontaneous creativity uncorrupted by the trappings of civilization” (Muir 2010, 29). Ward and Huber (2018) also interpret the focus on “authenticity” as a response to the “social and cultural dislocation” associated with the modern world (4).
- <sup>7</sup> Miller (2010) traces the cross-pollination of commercial and folkloric recording (9, 240). See also Hamilton (2008) on the folk versus popular divide and the “inauthenticity” of recorded blues (16–17).
- <sup>8</sup> “Going away to leave” appears in the opening verse of Muddy Waters, “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” Aristocrat 1305, Chess 1514, 1948. See Oliver’s (1968) open-ended, speculative reading of the meaning of the traditional couplet “The sun’s gonna shine in my backdoor someday / And the wind’s gonna change, gonn’ blow my blues away” (19–20).
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Johnson’s performances of songs were remarkably consistent—including spoken asides—as evidenced especially in takes from the Dallas sessions from June 1937. As Gioia (2008) notes, many later fans influenced by folklorist conceptions were disappointed with this evidence of craftsmanship, preferring to believe in a romanticized notion of spontaneous, improvised performance (170). Citing remarks from St. Louis bluesman Henry Townsend, Conforth and Wardlow (2019) argue that Johnson had a more stable and consistent conception of a song than other contemporary artists (162). Memphis Minnie also demonstrates consistency, including nearly identical solos in the two takes of “Keep It to Yourself” (1934).
- <sup>10</sup> Signifying in jazz and blues refers to reinterpreting or altering phrases, figures, structures, rhythms and/or grooves in music. It requires being able to play the music “straight” in order to create deviation and play.
- <sup>11</sup> 78 rpm records could record approximately three (not four) minutes of sound.
- <sup>12</sup> Chion (2016) discusses the process of editing out the “noises,” “squeaky glides that are produced by the movement of the fingers over the strings along the neck of the guitar, percussive sounds, and so forth,” (62–63) as part of the process of listening to classical guitar music.
- <sup>13</sup> See my discussion of composition practice in the blues in relation to Saussure (Simon 2017, 178–79).
- <sup>14</sup> Oliver (1969) dubs these verses that appear in various songs “maverick lines,” noting they “are given new rhymes and meaning by their juxtaposition with other ideas” (18).
- <sup>15</sup> With digital studio effects available today that were not available at the time, such as editing, splicing, auto-tuning, and pitch correction, the “mistake” could be “fixed.” Even today, these studio techniques are not commonly used for recording blues.
- <sup>16</sup> Writing during the civil rights era, Keil reads Black “soul” music, including the blues, as providing a strategy to respond to the need for African American community identity post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (165–66).
- <sup>17</sup> On “vital drive,” see Keil and Feld (2005, 59–62).

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# French Symbolist Aesthetics and Hazrat Inayat Khan's Musical Ontology

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MAURICE WINDLEBURN

**Abstract:** In 1913, French composer Claude Debussy hosted Sufi mystic and (in Debussy's own words) "musician-philosopher" Hazrat Inayat Khan at his home, where they performed for each other their music. Taking this brief meeting as my opening, this paper compares Khan's "musical ontology" to similar beliefs held by the French Symbolists in Debussy's milieu. Khan's assertion that a vibratory, spiritual plane is the source of material, everyday existence is related to the beliefs of musicologist and bookstore owner Edmond Bailly; the "cenesthetic" poetics of Symbolists like Charles Baudelaire; Paul Gauguin's "musical" paintings; and Debussy's implementation of silence in his music.

**Keywords:** Sound, vibration, synesthesia, emanationism, Claude Debussy

## Introduction

In 1913, pianist Walter Rummel arranged for Sufi musician Hazrat Inayat Khan to meet and perform for French composer Claude Debussy. Arriving at the composer's apartment, Khan and his brothers performed some North Indian Islamic music for Debussy, who in turn played his own piano music for the visitors. Inayat Khan's younger brother, Musharaff, also allegedly gave Debussy a brief *vina* lesson.<sup>1</sup> The precise impact of this encounter, on either Debussy or Khan, is difficult to ascertain; scholars have suggested that the unfinished "Indian drama" Debussy planned to write soon after, with the poet Gabriel D'Annunzio, was the result of their shared exposure to Khan's music (D'Annunzio had written an enthusiastic review of Khan's public performance in Paris); while conversely, the Sufi mystic would later refer to Debussy in his lectures and writings. Without making claims of direct influence (for which there is little evidence), this article takes Debussy and Khan's meeting as an opportunity to situate the latter's philosophy into Paris' turn of the century intellectual milieu, and to provide a novel reading of French Symbolist poetry, painting, and music via Khan's thought.

Although Khan was primarily a travelling musician in his early life, he later turned towards spiritual leadership, adapting Sufi mysticism into a universalist, syncretic spiritualism (much in the vein of the Theosophical Society, popular at the time). In the lectures he gave and writings he published throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, Khan espoused an emanationist ontology that especially privileged music as a primary metaphysical force – what I will here call, a "musical ontology". By musical ontology I do not mean an ontology *of* music, but rather, an ontology that claims music (or some related phenomenon like sound or vibration) as the cosmological origin, first principle, or *apeiron* of all things. Khan's own musical ontology will be outlined in greater detail below, after which it will be compared to the ideas of certain French Symbolists. Emerging throughout the late-nineteenth century, Symbolism was by the 1910s a well-established (even somewhat passe) aesthetic paradigm in Paris. As with Khan, Symbolist figures often placed an especially high value on music, not only as the aesthetic ideal towards which all art should strive, but also as the universe's underlying metaphysical force – the "truth" all art should seek. Symbolism's own musical ontology was largely indebted to Schopenhauerian beliefs flowing into the movement via French Wagnerism; yet it was

further supported by both Western and Eastern mysticism, occultism, and spirituality. For Khan and many Symbolists, an ontological division existed between the everyday material world, and a more primary vibratory (and often spiritual) plane beneath it.

My comparison between Khan and the Symbolists is in three parts. The first focuses on musicologist Edmond Bailly, whose bookstore *Librairie de l'art independant* was a central hub for both Symbolist and esoteric thinkers. A personal friend of Khan's, Bailly made many similar claims for music's metaphysical primacy, postulating a spiritual, vibratory realm beneath material existence. In the second section, an analogous ontological divide between material and vibratory is read into the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, whose literary synaesthesia confused the senses in order to reach a deeper "cenesthetic" resonance. In the third section, Paul Gauguin's paradoxical attempt to make painting truer to its "inner force" by emulating music is understood via Khan's hierarchy of the senses – where sound sits closer to the spiritual plane than does light. Debussy's use of silence is read in a similar manner, given that Khan's purest form of vibration, "abstract sound", is silent. To conclude, some past criticisms of vibrational or musical ontologies (like Khan's) are raised, though primarily for the purpose of situating both Khan and the Symbolist's thought into a broader history of ideas. First though, some additional mention of Khan's biography and his musical ontology needs to be given.

### The Spiritual Plane of Abstract Sound

Born in 1882 in the North Indian city of Baroda (now Vadodara), Khan was the member of a musically accomplished family – his grandfather was the local maharajah's court musician, and his uncle had travelled to England, studying at the Royal College of Music. Trained as a musician from an early age, Khan travelled throughout India as a performer, leading to a successful tour of the United States (where he accompanied the famous exotic dancer Ruth St Denis), and a visit to Europe in 1912 (where he made his appearance at Debussy's home).<sup>2</sup> At the outbreak of World War I, Khan immigrated to England, and, in the face of comparatively little interest in his music, became more involved in the propagation of his Sufi beliefs. Khan developed a universalist form of Sufi mysticism, partly detached from its Islamic roots, that in 1921 formed the basis of a more organised religious group called the "Sufi Movement" – headquartered at first in the outskirts of Paris, then in Geneva (though with branches throughout Western Europe and America). The group underwent a noticeable expansion throughout the 1920s, but reached its peak by the time of Khan's death in 1927.

The bulk of Khan's writings on music have been published as a compendium titled *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, but most of these texts were first delivered as public lectures. Throughout the collection Khan establishes a core claim that everything is music – stating that, "to me architecture is music, gardening is music, farming is music, painting is music, poetry is music" (Khan 1996: 3). Yet two separate conceptions of the word "music" are actually at play in Khan's thought; the first is music as it is commonly understood – music as an artform that we hear; the second refers to a more primary vibration lying beneath all things: a type of pure "movement" Khan calls "abstract sound", or *sawt-e-sarmad* (and elsewhere, *anahad*).

This "abstract sound" is a primary ontological force that coalesces into the concrete objects, beings, things, or forms we perceive in everyday life. These concrete entities in turn constitute a separate ontological plane to abstract sound. Khan's ontology hence resembles many process philosophies, where a temporal flux consistently creates, maintains, or destroys the objects otherwise enduring to our senses. As Khan clearly states, "Everything that has been created, and then constructed or destroyed, has come into being through vibration and sound" (Khan 1996: 292); elsewhere he notes that

If the whole creation can be well explained it is by the phases of sound or vibration, which have manifested in different grades in all their various forms in life. Objects and names and forms are but the



expression of vibrations in different aspects. Even all that we call matter or substance, and all that does not seem to speak or sound – it is all in reality vibration (Khan 1996: 18).

In addition to representing a process philosophy, Khan's thought is also deeply spiritualist: he considers the "grosser" (his term) plane of concrete objects to be fundamentally "material", while the abstract sound beneath it is "spiritual", acting as an ontological ground. Although Khan claims that "spirit and matter are the same in the higher sense" (Khan 1996: 9), this is only insofar as abstract sound is responsible for the material plane's existence: the latter is ontologically dependent on the former, resulting in a hierarchised (rather than a flat) ontology. Yet since the material plane has abstract sound as its foundation, interactions between material entities are still considered "musical" by Khan (who labels such relationships as either harmonious or dissonant). Because all things are made from the same vibrating flux (the spiritual plane of abstract sound), they may resonate within each other, and this can occur even when they are spatially or temporally distant. Khan claims that "All things and beings in the universe are connected with each other – visibly or invisibly – and through vibrations a communication is established between them on all the planes of existence" (Khan 1996: 126).

The spiritual nature of abstract sound, along with its omnipresence and ontological primacy, leads Khan to make it synonymous with God or "the Beloved". Regularly evoking the Biblical origin of the universe, Khan claims that abstract sound is the Voice of God – hence subscribing to an immanent theology where God exists in all things and where all things are interconnected as God's first and ongoing creative act. One important consequence of Khan's understanding that abstract sound is the Voice of God is his conflation of words and music. Khan grants words a communicative function akin to the direct physical impact musical vibrations may have on the body. Khan notes that he has "found in every word a certain musical value, a melody in every thought, harmony in every feeling" (Khan 1996: xi), maintaining that "Although it has been dimmed by manifestation, your thought, your mind, is made of sound" (Khan 1996: 24). For Khan, words – as well as thoughts and feelings – are manifestations of abstract sound (just like material objects); this view consequently abolishes the arbitrary nature of signs and the inherent gap between signifier and signified, sender and receiver, allowing Khan to claim that sound is integral to a word's meaning, and that words have unmediated effects on bodies and things.<sup>3</sup>

Abstract sound (the root of all objects, words, and thoughts) is not, however, the sound that we hear. Abstract sound is not music in the common sense, and in fact abstract sound cannot be heard at all (at least not through the ears – something I return to below). The music we hear is an entity existing on Khan's material plane along with feelings, thoughts, words, forms, and objects. Nonetheless, music has a privileged relationship with the spiritual plane beneath it, not shared by other material entities. For Khan, music is a "picture of the Beloved" (Khan 1996: 2) and he mentions how "among all the different arts, the art of music has been especially considered divine, because it is the exact miniature of the law working through the whole universe" (Khan 1996: 3). Elsewhere Khan states that

The music of the universe is the background of the little picture which we call music. Our sense of music, our attraction to music, shows that music is in the depth of our being. Music is behind the working of the whole universe. Music is not only life's greatest object, but music is life itself (Khan 1996: 11).

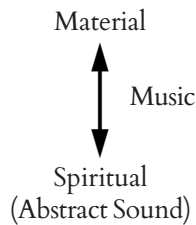
Hence, a macro-microcosmic relationship exists between abstract sound as the source of everything, and music as an audible, material entity (one thing among many). Music reflects abstract sound's own manner of working, and this emulation is so faithful that the two become almost synonymous – their distinction nearly collapses as Khan's above-given quote suggests.

Consequently, Khan believes that music may almost turn "matter into spirit, into its original condition" (Khan 1996: 114), and so music acts as a point of mediation between the material and spiritual planes: it is "the bridge over the gulf between the form and the formless" (Khan 1996: 113–114). As such, Khan claims that music has magical properties – that it is able to affect things in a manner that is not readily explainable from our position on the material plane and this is thanks to the contiguity that exists between music and abstract sound, the latter of which imbues all things.



A belief in something akin to abstract sound was common among occultists, Theosophists, and philosophers in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. This included composer and musicologist Edmond Bailly, whose bookstore on the rue de la Chaussée d'Antin (opened in 1889) was an important meeting place for Symbolist poets, painters, and musicians, as well as followers of esoteric thought. Debussy was a regular visitor to the store, and Bailly was a personal friend of Inayat Khan's between 1911–1914. Bailly's writings on music share some striking parallels to the Sufi mystic's, defining vibration as a "pure movement" that gives "form and structure" to "both the higher and lower planes" (see Pasler 2020: 334). Sound (or at least vibration – the distinction is ambiguous with Bailly) is a force that exists in literally everything, including trees, wind, planets, and even the climate; yet these vibrations or sounds are often "microscopic" or purely "ambient" (see Pasler 2020: 333) – in other words, they are not necessarily heard. Like Khan, Bailly spiritualised these vibrations, upholding the belief that God's voice was the universe's origin and its ongoing, underlining force.

A shared ontology can hence be derived from both Khan and Bailly's beliefs: the universe, as we experience it, is that of a "higher", "grosser", or "material" plane of seemingly discreet entities; yet these entities have as their source a shared "lower", "thinner", or "spiritual" vibratory plane. Music, as a privileged entity, mediates between these planes by emulating the spiritual within the material.



### The Long Echo of Cenesthetic Correspondences

Given Inayat Khan and Bailly's friendship, it is tempting to postulate some direct line of influence between the two; yet as mentioned earlier, their ideas were common among many *fin-de-siècle* thinkers and artists. Musicologist Jann Pasler mentions how Bailly's vibratory "law of analogies" had one origin in the writings of Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society (Pasler 2020: 335); Pasler also notes how Symbolist aesthetics – particularly those established by Charles Baudelaire in his well-known poem *Correspondences* – provide yet another origin for Bailly's thought. In the first stanza of Baudelaire's poem, he mentions how symbols form a forest, resonating through those who walk within:

Nature is a temple, where the living  
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;  
Man walks within these groves of symbols, each  
Of which regards him as a kindred thing. (Baudelaire 1993: 19)

These "symbols" are not, however, of a typically semantic kind, having no singular, preestablished meaning. Instead, they are more akin to vibrations – permeating not only the person who walks through them, but also one another. Baudelaire's poem illustrates this core principle of Symbolist thought – that all things have everything else as their meaning. This results in an infinite refraction, or a process Baudelaire calls, in his second stanza, a "long echo":

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,  
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,  
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,  
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond. (Baudelaire 1993: 19)

This echo, akin to Khan's abstract sound, connects all entities at a level below the material plane ("shadowy", "from afar"). Baudelaire's second stanza also introduces synaesthesia as a particular type

of correspondence or “echo”; here, the different senses (and the physical phenomena they relate to) blend with one another, forming a unity.

Synesthetic correspondences became a foundation-stone for Symbolist thought and poetry throughout the late-nineteenth century – evident in Paul Verlaine’s association of consonant sounds with concepts or moods, as well as Arthur Rimbaud and René Ghil’s (differing) linkages of vowels to colours. Intriguingly, synesthesia also appears as a topic of discussion throughout Inayat Khan’s lectures, where he maintains that “In reality there is music in colour, there is music in lines, there is music in the forest where there is a variety of trees and plants, in the way in which they correspond with each other” (Khan 1996: 18). This quote almost reads as a commentary on Baudelaire’s poem, with its description not only of musical colors and lines but also a forest of correspondences. A similarly suggestive link also exists between Verlaine, Rimbaud and Ghil’s poetic experiments and Khan’s assertion that “Every vowel, such as *a* or *e* or *o*, has its psychological significance, and the composition of every word has a chemical and psychological significance” (Khan 1996: 260).<sup>4</sup>

Yet the connection between Khan’s thought and Symbolist poetics runs deeper than just these few suggestive quotes, since both postulate a resonant core beneath the senses that allows for synesthetic correspondences to occur. Literary critic Lauren Silvers has noted that the synesthesia Symbolist poets evoked in their work was not necessarily for its own sake; rather, it was “a privileged means of transcending such correspondences in the service of a more profound and unified mode of feeling” (Silvers 2014: 382). Silvers follows *fin de siècle* psychologists in referring to this feeling as “cenesthetic”: an intense corporeal sensation generally considered vibratory in nature. Cenesthetic poetry therefore involves the production of a direct physical encounter between words and body, at a level below the strictly intellectual, but also below the individual senses.

Silvers elucidates this rather opaque aesthetic theory by recourse to the philosopher and critic Jules de Gaultier, who, in his study of Verlaine’s work, argued “that poetry can draw on the origins of language as primordial, affective, nonlexical communication” (see Silvers 2014: 390). Gaultier believed that words had a direct vibratory impact on their reader and consequently, a word’s meaning was subordinate to its musical sound. Gaultier hence interprets Baudelaire’s *Correspondences* as a cenesthetic, rather than synesthetic, poem; that is, “not as a treatise on sensory analogies but as a work that excavates ‘sensation’ in its most profound, ‘brute’ state, as ‘original nervous vibration’ and ‘primitive vibration’” (Silvers 2014: 395). For Gaultier, Symbolist poetry evokes a realm that is “Beyond the psychic regions where the perceptions of vision, hearing, touch, scent, and taste are clearly distinguished from one another, toward the confines of the unconscious” (see Silvers 2014: 395). This “original nervous vibration” that our body naturally transforms into the “diverse perceptions” of our senses is hence triggered via reversal in Symbolist poetry; that is, the literary confusion of the senses leads towards the “primitive vibration” that is their common source.

Strong connections can once again be made to Inayat Khan’s thinking, the Sufi noting how,

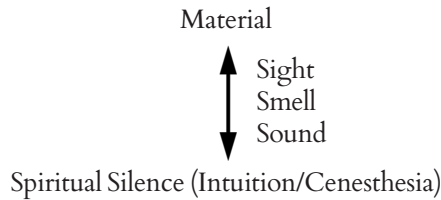
Since both colour and sound are perceived differently and we have different senses through which we perceive them, we have distinguished between visible and audible things. But in reality those who meditate, who concentrate, those who go within themselves, who trace the origin of life – they begin to see that behind these outer five senses there is one sense hidden, and this sense is capable of doing all that which we seem to do or experience (Khan 1996: 42).

For Khan, Gaultier, and the Symbolists more broadly, the senses and their correspondences were a byway leading to a deeper vibratory force – an abstract sound, the perception of which was not, strictly speaking, aural, or even necessarily sensual, but rather cenesthetic or, using Khan’s more conventional term, “intuitive” (Khan 1996: 287).<sup>5</sup>

### Descending a Vibrational Hierarchy through Painting and Music

Khan’s musical ontology implies a hierarchy of the senses (and their correlative artforms), with abstract sound as their shared ontological ground. Khan states how “In its original condition vibra-

tion is inaudible and invisible, but in its first stage towards manifestation it becomes audible, and in its next step visible" (Khan 1996: 34). Moving from the material plane to the spiritual, a mystic would pass through the sense of sight and colour (for which Khan uses the Vedantic term *jatanada*), then through smell and fragrance, onto audible sound (what Khan calls *nada* or *Nada Brahma*), and finally, to the purely intuitive experience of abstract sound: the finest, most spiritual vibration (Khan 1996: 34). The Symbolist poets similarly used words to transverse a comparable hierarchy, evoking the senses (sight, smell, sound) and intermingling them to reach a properly cenesthetic core. This ontological hierarchy, implicit in both Khan and the Symbolists' thought, will now be used to explain the aesthetic priorities of two non-literary Symbolists: Gauguin and Debussy.



Gauguin's paintings, like his literary compatriots' use of words, treated colour and light as forms of vibration that could have a direct, unmediated, impact on viewers. According to Gauguin, the artist should not just paint figurative representations of material reality but abstract away from this reality to suggest the spiritual plane beneath. This approach was partly justified by reference to music, whose vibratory status was less disputed than painting's, as was its abstract, non-semantic and non-representational nature.<sup>6</sup> As art historian Debora Silverman succinctly notes,

Gauguin considered the direct, autonomous power of music as a key to the realm of the eternal, and he tried to emulate this power in the expressive capacities of line and color. In comparing the harmony of color to musical tones, for example, Gauguin directed his painting to "touch the heavens," evoke the ineffable world of the divine, and allow the painter and viewer to set sail "on the phantom ship of the infinite," transcending the limits of physical materiality (Silverman 2008: 151).

In the same way that music could supposedly transport its listeners beyond mundane material reality (a common notion in post-Romantic thought), Gauguin's novel arrangements of color and light would shift both painter and viewer into a spiritual realm. This was theoretically plausible because "colour, which as well as music is vibration, attains to what is most general and therefore most vague in nature: its inner force" (Gauguin 1997: 31).

Yet Gauguin's emulation of music (much like the Symbolist poets' use of synesthesia) was largely a means towards a different end. Gauguin moved painting away from representation, making it more "musical", but this was so that painting could be more faithful to its own vibratory essence as colour and light. What Gauguin sought was not necessarily some kind of "visual music", but an evocation of the deeper spiritual realm that both music and painting had as their common source. This transcendental vibration, or "inner force", once again suggests Inayat Khan's abstract sound, and music becomes, yet again, the metaphorical bridge between this spiritual substrata and material reality.

Like Gauguin, certain *fin de siècle* musicians also wished to emphasise their medium's "inner force"; however, emulating music was obviously not a viable way in which this could be achieved. Music could not suggest abstract sound by simply being itself in the same way that painting could suggest abstract sound by emulating music. Yet since abstract sound operates below the senses – with Khan stating that 'The vibrations of this [abstract] sound are too fine to be either audible or visible to the material ears or eyes' (Khan 1996: 170) – it is essentially *silent*; music might, therefore, strive towards abstract sound by implementing or emulating silence.

This paradoxical aesthetic is most evident in Debussy's compositions, where an unusual amount of silence is often present (particularly in the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, adapted from Maurice Maeterlinck's Symbolist play) (Rolf 2016; Wiskus 2013: 39–52; Johnson 2020: 53–68) – the com-

poser himself stating, in a letter to Pierre Louÿs, that “Silence is a fine thing and God knows that the empty bars in Pelléas bear witness to my love for that kind of emotion” (see Rolf 2016: 119). The philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has also commented on how Debussy regularly “seeks to grasp the liminal moment when silence becomes music” (Jankélévitch 2003: 144), noting the composer’s use of soft dynamics and his penchant for decrescendos that lead “to the point where almost-nothing and nothing become indistinguishable” (Jankélévitch 2003: 144). Debussy’s Symphonic *Nocturne* “Nuages”, as well the piano Preludes “Mouvement” and “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses”, all end by fading away into nothing.

Jankélévitch also briefly mentions Debussy’s Prelude “Brouillards” (which means “fogs”) as an example, whose ending deserves closer attention, since it offers a clear case of sound transpiring into silent, intuited abstract sound (see Figure 1). Additionally, the composition date of this Prelude – between late 1912 and early 1913 – along with the fact that Rummel premiered it soon after organizing Debussy and Khan’s meeting, offers a strong temptation to suggest that it was one of the pieces Debussy played for his visitors. The Prelude ends on an unusual III–II cadence, strongly implying resolution to the tonic (a minor). This descending cadence, along with Debussy’s soft dynamics and his direction “*Presque plus rien*” (almost nothing), gives the impression that the piano’s sound is falling away into oblivion, or into a “fog” of silence. Nonetheless, the listener (at least one acquainted with Western tonality) still “hears” the un-played tonic chord that is strongly implied by the cadence; that is, they hear it in their mind’s ear despite its failure to sound. In other words, the listener *intuits* the chord Debussy has submerged into silence – they “hear” an abstract sound.



Fig. 1: Claude Debussy, “Brouillards” (*Preludes pour Piano (2e Livre)*, Paris: Durand, 1913), mm. 49–52

### Conclusion: Towards a History of Musical Ontologies

In Gauguin’s paintings, colour and light emulate music to suggest the abstract sound that is painting’s ontological core; meanwhile, Debussy drags his music down into silence to suggest abstract sound – the ontological foundation of music. These two statements highlight the paradoxical nature of ontological claims like Inayat Khan’s, and similarly, the Symbolists’ aesthetic aims. In both cases, a medium (whether of words, color, or sound) becomes more itself, reaches its own inner core, by emulating something other than itself, something supposedly closer to the inner force of abstract sound. In the case of poetry and painting this something else is music; in the case of music, it is silence.

An awareness of this paradox has fed criticism of musical and vibrational ontologies. Jankélévitch, although receptive to Debussy’s privileging of silence, also critiqued what he called “musicosophy”: the postulating of “an invisible and inaudible harmony, suprasensible and supra-audible”, or a music “of another realm”, as the cosmic force behind everything (Jankélévitch 2003: 10). He notes that such claims lead us away from music as it is actually heard, and that it is not very clear why an unhearable vibration should be labelled as music in the first place. Claims for a musical ontology like Inayat Khan’s are, in Jankélévitch’s eyes, only ever metaphorical at best. More recently, Brian Kane has critiqued the “ontological turn” in sound studies and what he coins “onto-aesthetics” – applied to scholars like Christoph Cox and Greg Hainge, who postulate vibrational ontologies akin to Khan’s.<sup>7</sup> If “artworks are selected, discussed, and esteemed when they disclose their ontology” (Kane 2016: 11) than an onto-aesthetics is at work, which Kane argues is a category mistake that makes “Objects embody their ontology” even though “*Embodiment* does not come in degrees. It is all or nothing. Ontology, being embodied, is not *capable* of being exemplified” (Kane 2016: 12). For Kane, painting cannot be more itself by emulating music (or by taking on any other aesthetic commitment), and

music cannot be more musical by implementing silence: a painting is painterly by merit of being a painting, and music is music, period.

There has been retaliation to these critiques (notably Cox 2018: 131–134), but my reason for mentioning them is not to enter this debate. Rather, by noting the applicability of Jankélévitch and Kane's criticisms (whether or not they are substantiated) to both Khan's thought and Symbolist aesthetics, these theories can be situated into a much larger intellectual history of musical ontologies. For Jankélévitch, a chief proponent of "musicosophy" was Arthur Schopenhauer – a noteworthy influence on the Symbolists, largely by way of Richard Wagner; additionally, Cox's sonic ontology (one of Kane's prime targets) is indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche (who was Gaultier's key influence) and Henri Bergson (a contemporary of the Symbolists). Cox's precedents also stretch far beyond the *fin de siècle* towards Deleuzian new materialism and post-Cagean sound art. Furthermore, an onto-aesthetic attempt to reach the heart of one's artistic medium can be considered a key principle of modernist aesthetics, evident in numerous cases spanning the era between Debussy and Gauguin to Cage and the Abstract Expressionists.<sup>8</sup>

Inayat Khan's musical ontology is hence not only comparable to French Symbolist thought but is part of a much broader history of metaphysical speculation on sound and vibration's ontological primacy. Additionally, similarities between Khan's musical ontology and Symbolist thought highlight the ongoing cross-cultural entanglement of Western and non-Western philosophies in the development of this idea (being situated between Schopenhauer's Indophilia and Cage's fascination with Zen).<sup>9</sup> Of course, an array of distinctions and differences between the thoughts of Khan and the Symbolists have not been given here – differences that would multiply fourfold if the history of musical ontologies was told in its entirety.<sup>10</sup> Such a task is vital for a comprehensive history of ideas, though it is obviously far beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the above-given comparisons between Khan and the Symbolists aim to both encourage and contribute to an ongoing consideration of musical ontologies, resituating the Symbolists into the history of this idea and emphasizing Inayat Khan's place in its development and dissemination.

*University of Melbourne, Australia*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For accounts of Khan's meeting with Debussy, see Lesure 2019: 294–295, and Pasler 2020: 331–332.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Inayat Khan's tours of the United States and Europe, see Sedgwick 2017: 158–162.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida has notably criticized the idea that language can act as a pure presence in the manner Khan espouses (see Derrida 1973); however, for a critique of Derrida directly pertinent to Khan's mention of God's voice, see Wolterstorff 1995: 153–170.

<sup>4</sup> For an *alchemical* interpretation of Rimbaud's synesthetic poetry, see Meltzer 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Connections can also be made to more recent understandings of "affect" as a vibratory and essentially sonic phenomenon (see in particular Goodman 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Gauguin was not the only Symbolist painter who took music as their model. Odilon Redon claimed that his drawings "place us, in the same way as music does, in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate" (Redon 1986: 22), while Gauguin's friend Vincent van Gogh favorably noted how "Painting as it is now, promises to become more subtle – more like music and less like sculpture" (see Schmunk 2011: 178).

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Graham Harman would label Khan's ontological privileging of abstract sound as an instance of "undermining", criticizing it on the ground that it makes anything at a level above abstract sound somehow "less real" or, at least, less valuable (Harman 2018: 46). In Khan's case this would seem to include music as actually heard, something he otherwise holds so dear.

<sup>8</sup> Kane mentions Clement Greenberg's theory of modernism and his argument in favour of Abstract Expressionism as a clear instance of onto-aesthetics (Kane 2016: 10–11). For a discussion of vibratory ontologies and modernist art more contemporaneous with Khan, see Henderson 2002.



- <sup>9</sup> This is important to mention given recent claims that musical or vibrational ontologies are manifestations of “whiteness”. Although Cox has noted the erroneousess of such claims (Cox 2018), it nonetheless stands that non-Europeans have rarely been the focus of studies on these ontologies.
- <sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot long ago made notable distinctions between Bergson and the Symbolist’s ideas (Blanchot 1949), and although the Deleuzian ontological divide between “actual” and “virtual” may, at first glance, seem to align with Khan’s division of the material and spiritual, Gilles Deleuze was, of course, a materialist, not an emanationist, and so does not give his “virtual” spiritual importance (although it has been suggested otherwise; see Hallward 2006).

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# Sizer on Sad Music

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JAMES O. YOUNG

**Abstract:** Laura Sizer holds that the sadness induced by sad music enables listeners to focus on the formal and aesthetic features of music. These features may include the formal features of music or “the beautiful unalloyed sadness” music conveys. Unfortunately, her proposal is, at best, only a partial solution to the paradox of sad music. Empirical evidence indicates, contrary to what Sizer holds, that sad music inclines listeners to think about themselves and their own experience, not about the music they are hearing. Sizer’s solution to the paradox of sad music is also unable to explain why enjoyment of sad music is correlated with trait empathy.

**Keywords:** Paradox of sad music, philosophy of music, Laura Sizer, aesthetics, music and emotion

## Introduction

Progress is being made in understanding the attractions of listening to sad music. This progress is the result, in large part, of the fact that in recent years, psychologists have paid increased attention to the paradox of sad music. Many well-designed and conducted experiments have begun to shed light on why listeners will willingly listen to music that makes them sad. While much of the progress has been the result of psychological experiments, philosophers still have a role to play in solving the paradox of sad music. Philosophers are responsible for many of the proposed solutions to the paradox. Psychologists have gone on to seek experimental support for philosophers’ hypotheses. Philosophers also have a role to play in interpreting the results psychologists obtain and formulating and revising solutions to the paradox of sad music on the basis of these results. Sizer (2019) has engaged with the psychology literature and proposed a novel solution. She holds that the sadness induced by sad music enables listeners to focus on the aesthetic features of music. Unfortunately, her proposal is, at best, only a partial solution to the paradox of sad music.

The paradox of sad music stems from the apparent tension between four plausible statements: (1) sadness is an unpleasant affective state; (2) people typically strive to avoid unpleasant affective states; (3) sad music arouses sadness; (4) many people willingly listen to sad music. Two main approaches to the paradox of sad music may be identified. The first approach may be called *eliminativist*. It denies the third of these statements. The second approach is *compensationist*. According to this sort of approach, sad music arouses sadness in listeners, but listeners receive a compensation that outweighs any unpleasantness.

Formalists will generally adopt an eliminativist approach to resolving the paradox of sad music. In this respect, Kivy is a representative formalist. Since Kivy believes that music does not arouse ordinary emotions such as sadness, the paradox of sad music is not a problem for him. On his view, “it would be utterly inexplicable why anyone would willfully submit himself” to music that arouses negative emotions (Kivy 1989, 23). He simply denies that music arouses emotions such as sadness. Indeed, he has made the paradox of sad music a key premise in his argument against the view that music arouses any ordinary emotions. Crucial to Kivy’s position is the cognitive theory of emotions, a theory that has the consequence that no one can be in an emotional state without having an appropriate belief state with respect to some intentional object. For example, a person cannot feel sad without believing that some unfortunate event has occurred. Since a performance of music cannot

be the sort of event about which one is sad, Kivy reasons, listening to a performance cannot arouse sadness in listeners.

Even some non-formalist philosophers have adopted an eliminativist approach to the resolution of the paradox of sad music. For example, Carroll Pratt embraces the aesthetic attitude theory holds that our attitude towards music is “detached contemplation” (1931: 88). People have the aesthetic attitude when they are not concerned with practical matters. Rather, they focus on an aesthetic object, such as a musical composition, as an object to be appreciated for its own sake, not as something that can serve some practical purposes. Since, on this view, music is removed from practical purposes, it does not arouse emotions such as sadness.

I agree with Sizer that any satisfactory resolution to the paradox of sad music is likely to be compensationist. The empirical evidence that sad music arouses sadness is just too strong to ignore and this evidence renders eliminative responses increasingly implausible. Recent research confirms that listeners self-report the arousal of sadness by sad music (Ladinig et al. 2019). I agree with Sizer that physiological evidence indicates that sad music arouses sadness. In addition to the studies that she cites, strong physiological evidence that sad music arouses sadness has been marshaled by Vuoskoski and Eerola (2012). They found that individuals listening to sad music performed, on word-recall and judgement tasks, in ways consistent with the arousal of sadness. Other studies have found that skin conductance measures and other physiological metric are consistent with the arousal of sadness by sad music (Krumhansl, 1997).

However, it must be noted that, contrary to what Sizer indicates, the neuro-physiological evidence that music arouses sadness is not as consistently strong as the evidence provided by self-reports and physiological metrics. Some fMRI studies have found that parts of the brain associated with experience of sadness, including the amygdala, are activated by sad music. These studies are, however, inconclusive since the parts of the brain activated by sad music are also associated with emotions other than sadness and the results of these studies have not been replicated by experimenters (Eerola et al. 2018, 106). Despite the fact that the neuro-physiological evidence is inconclusive, abundant evidence indicates that sad music arouses sadness. Since sadness is unpleasant, experience of sad music must provide some compensation or listeners are behaving bizarrely when they willingly listen to sad music.

I also agree that Sizer’s proposal has a *prima facie* plausibility. It must be admitted that Sizer is right in holding that a sad state enables listeners to focus. It is not unreasonable to think that among the objects on which sad listeners can concentrate are the formal properties of music. Focus on music is difficult and anything that can enhance listeners’ focus is plausibly held to contribute to their enjoyment of music.

Before turning to Sizer’s solution to the paradox of sad music, we need to address a preliminary point. While most writers on the paradox of sad music talk about the arousal of an emotion, Sizer prefers to talk about the arousal of a sad mood. Sizer regards a sad mood as a “diffuse, objectless affective state that subtly modulates our thoughts, but not toward a particular topic or subject matter and not inspiring us to take a particular course of action” (2019, 257). In contrast, emotions, including the emotions of sadness, are presumably directed towards some object.

The shift from talk about emotions to talk about moods is not helpful. Little, if any, empirical evidence can be found for a distinction between moods and emotions. If moods and emotions are different, they likely differ only in degree (Vuoskoski and Eerola, 2012). Moreover, this essay will present evidence that the sadness felt as a result of listening to sad music is directed towards an object and that, consequently, even by Sizer’s criteria, the affective states aroused by music are emotions.

### **Sizer’s solution**

Sizer’s innovative proposal is to say that the sadness aroused by sad music enhances listeners’ capacity to focus on music and to enjoy what it has to offer. She writes that, “Sad moods, therefore,

encourage and promote the sort of focused music listening that enhances the listener's engagement with and experience of the music" (2019, 263). The compensation that listeners receive from the arousal of sadness, on this view, is an enhanced capacity to focus on music. I grant that a feeling sad enhances listeners' capacity to focus and, consequently, may enhance listeners' capacity to focus on music. I deny, however, that the paradox of sad music can be solved simply by reference to the capacity of sad music to promote focus by arousing sadness. In general, I find Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad, at best, incomplete.

The first problem with Sizer's solution is that it leaves uncertainty about which features of sad music are appreciated. We are told both that, "Sad moods can pull us in and keep us wrapped up in the music itself and the beautiful unalloyed sadness it conveys" (263) and that sad music "allows the listener to experience a pure, unalloyed sadness that modulates the processing styles of the listener in ways that keep attention engaged with the formal and structural properties of the music itself" (264). Whether Sizer believes that sad music enhances concentration on the music's sadness or on its formal properties, her position faces difficulties. Her position also faces a general objection.

Let us begin by examining the general problem. Sizer writes that, "Sad moods, as compared to happy or neutral moods, are associated with a narrowing of attention, a turn inward with a greater focus on self and one's feelings as opposed to events in the outside environment" (263). This is certainly true. In fact, I will go on to cite some evidence that supports this contention. Notice, however, that it is incompatible with Sizer's stated position. Sad moods turn attention inwards, but her view is that sad moods lead listeners to focus on music. Music is in the outside environment, not something in ourselves. Let us, however, be charitable and assume that the sadness aroused by sad music leads listeners to focus on music and not themselves and their emotions.

Consider first the possibility that sad music, by enhancing listeners' powers of concentration, gives them an increased capacity to concentrate on the "beautiful unalloyed sadness that it conveys." Grant that this is true. At best, we have been given a partial account of what makes experience of sad music valuable. On the face of it, something is odd about saying that sadness is beautiful. At very least, we are owed an account of why experience of unalloyed sadness is found to be beautiful and how this experience compensates listeners for the sadness that they must undergo in order to have this experience.

Sizer's second proposal is that sad music enhances listeners' capacity to focus on "the formal and structural properties of the music." This proposal faces a difficulty similar to the difficulty faced by the first proposal. It does not explain why focus on the formal properties of music is rewarding. Under the influence of Young (2014), I am deeply sceptical about the prospects for a formalist account of why experience of music is rewarding. Nevertheless, let us grant that attention to the formal properties of music is rewarding. Sizer's position still faces a serious difficulty. It is incompatible with recent empirical research.

Recent research by Taruffi et al. indicates that, contrary to Sizer's hypothesis, sad music has a greater tendency than happy music to promote mind-wandering (Taruffi et al. 2017). Taruffi et al. write that listeners engage in mind-wandering, they mean that the listeners direct their attention inwards and become immersed in matters of great personal significance. In an experiment that used both music from film soundtracks and classical repertoire, Taruffi and her colleagues found that both self-reports and fMRI data indicate that sad music is more likely than happy music to induce mind-wandering. The fMRI data indicated that sad music recruits the Default Mode Network, parts of the brain that are associated with mind-wandering. These results are directly contrary to Sizer's hypothesis.

Sizer might object that she is concerned only with understanding why canonical listeners, as Kivy calls them, enjoy listening to sad music. Kivy's canonical listeners are those who focus on and appreciate the formal properties of music and who do not have ordinary emotions (or moods) aroused in them by music. It is unlikely that she would adopt this view, since Sizer believes, unlike Kivy, that sad music can arouse sad effective states even, or perhaps especially, in listeners who carefully concentrate on experience of music.

### Empathy and enjoyment of sad music

Perhaps the biggest problem with Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music is that it is insensitive to the fact that listeners have a variety of responses to sad music. For a start, a significant percentage of listeners do not enjoy listening to sad music. In one study, 42% of the test subjects reported that they do not enjoy listening to sad music (Huron and Vuoskoski 2020). This finding suggests that enjoyment of sad music is linked to certain personality traits and, in fact, certain personality traits have consistently been found to be associated with enjoyment of sad music. Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music is unable to account for the fact that these personality traits are associated with enjoyment of sad music.

The two traits associated with enjoyment of sad music are empathy and openness to experience. Individuals with openness to experience have an active imagination (fantasy), aesthetic sensitivity, attentiveness to their inner feelings, a preference for variety in their experience and intellectual curiosity. Empathy is the other personality trait associated with enjoyment of sad music. It has four sub-traits: a disposition to empathic concern, a disposition to mirror the feelings of other people or to feel personal distress, a capacity for perspective taking, that is, for adopting the points of view of other people, and fantasy (the disposition to imagine the mental state of a fictional character).

Let us begin by considering the connection between trait empathy and enjoyment of sad music. Many studies have found that empathetic individuals are more likely to enjoy sad music than less empathetic persons (e.g., Taruffi and Koelsch 2014; Kawakami and Katashira 2015). The two sub-traits associated with enjoyment of music are empathetic concern and fantasy. The disposition to feel personal distress and perspective taking are not (Huron and Vuoskoski, 2020). This makes sense. A tendency to feel distress when listening to sad music, perhaps distress linked to adopting another person's point of view, is likely to reduce overall enjoyment of sad music. As we will see below, however, feeling empathetic concern is a positive experience.

If Sizer is right and the appreciation of music is, at least in large part, appreciation of music's formal properties, the fact that appreciation of sad music is associated with trait empathy is inexplicable. Pure musical form is not a suitable object of empathetic concern. Even the unalloyed beauty of sadness does not seem an appropriate object of empathetic concern. However, an alternative solution to the paradox of sad music is suggested by the correlation between trait empathy and the enjoyment of sad music.

Huron and Vuoskoski (2020) have proposed a solution to the paradox that is able to account for the data obtained in recent experiments. Their solution begins by acknowledging the well-established fact that sad music arouses sadness. Most likely sadness is aroused by emotional contagion. Huron and Vuoskoski then distinguish between emotions caused by contagion and what they call *repercussive emotions*. A *repercussive emotion* is a meta-response to other emotions. The suggestion is that the experience of sadness gives rise to a feeling of compassion and, in addition, this meta-response is positively-valenced.

The solution proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski is supported by several findings. The first is that many test subjects have reported feeling mixed emotions when listening to sad music. Test results also indicate that feeling compassion or empathetic concern is experienced as a positive emotion. (It must be admitted that these test results show that experience of compassion is positively-valenced when it follows the commission of an altruistic act. The test results have not shown that compassion is felt when listening to sad music is experienced as a positive emotion, but this is not an unreasonable presumption.) Most important, the solution proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski, unlike that proposed by Sizer, is able to explain why enjoyment of sad music is associated with trait empathy. One would expect that empathetic individuals will feel empathy when confronted by an experience of sadness. They are also likely to feel compassion. The solution to the paradox of sad music proposed by Huron and Vuoskoski is congruent with research in response to sad movies. Sad movies give rise to an empathetic response that is, in turn, accompanied by a feeling of being moved that may well be identified with a feeling of compassion (Eerola et al., 2018, 108).



The hypothesis of Huron and Vuoskoski is supported by another reason: some research indicates that music is valued, at least in part, because it provides listeners with a virtual person. Van del Tol and Edwards (2015) found that listeners report that their goals in listening to sad music include feeling a connection with both real and imaginary persons. Listeners frequently report that listening to sad music reminds them of people they know and brings back memories. Listeners also report that they feel befriended, empathized with and less alone when listening to sad music. The evidence that listeners feel a connection with actual people is consistent with the view that listening to sad music promotes mind-wandering. The evidence that listeners regard sad music as a kind of friend supports Huron and Vuoskoski's hypothesis. Van del Tol and Edwards did not ask their subjects whether they empathize with an imaginary person, but if listeners hear or imagine a persona in sad music, this persona could be the object of their empathy or compassion.

Recent empirical results are more compatible with aspects of Jerrold Levinson's classic solution to the paradox of sad music than they are with Sizer's. Levinson (1990) hypothesized that the enjoyment of emotional communion and empathetic responses are among the rewards of listening to sad music. Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) found empirical evidence of this. On a six-point scale, test subjects gave an average rating of 4.27 of the importance of feeling empathy while listening to sad music. (Significantly, a feeling of empathy was not found to be one of the rewards of listening to sad music.) The experimenters did not ask specifically about whether listeners feel compassion when listening to sad music and, consequently, their results do not fully support Huron and Vuoskoski's solution to the paradox of sad music. Taruffi and Koelsch gave test subjects the GEMS (Geneva Emotion Music Scale) categories as the answers they could give in reporting their feelings. Test subjects did, however, report feeling nostalgia (76%) and tenderness (51.6%), two of the options provided by GEMS, and these may be an indication that the subjects felt compassion. (GEMS only gives test these options when reporting their responses to music: peacefulness, tenderness, tension, joyful activation, nostalgia, sadness, power, transcendence, and wonder. In my view, GEMS is a seriously flawed instrument, but the scale's usefulness is a matter beyond the scope of this essay.)

Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) found support for Levinson's other hypotheses. In particular, they found support for Levinson's conjecture that listeners enjoy sad music because it enables them to imagine they have expressive capacities, to understand and savour feelings, be provided with emotional assurance, and have their moods regulated. In fact, their findings suggest that some of the rewards provided by listening to sad music are more valued than feelings of empathy and compassion. On the six-point scale mentioned above, listeners gave average ratings of 4.89 when asked whether they valued music as a way to understand feelings and receive emotional assurance. Emotion regulation received an average score of 4.65 and rewards of imagination 4.46. These results are all at odds with Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music though it must be admitted that Taruffi and Koelsch did not ask about the enjoyment listeners take from contemplation of the formal properties of music. The results also suggest that Huron and Vuoskoski's solution is, at best, incomplete.

It is worth noting, in this context, that if listeners feel compassion in listening to sad music, and this is part of the explanation of listeners' enjoyment of sad music, the persona theory of music may receive some support. If a persona theory is suggested by the empirical evidence, then this is further evidence that Sizer's theory is, at best, seriously incomplete since if the persona theory is right, music is not simply appreciated as contentless form.

### Openness to experience

To this point, another trait associated with enjoyment of sad music, openness to experience, has been ignored. Initially, the correlation between enjoyment of sad music may seem to support Sizer's solution to the paradox of sad music. Among the facets of openness to experience are aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity and a preference for variety. Consequently, one might think, listeners with this trait are likely to be inclined to appreciate formal properties of music. Certainly, these character traits are compatible with enjoying the formal properties of music.

Unfortunately, aesthetic sensitivity is not the only facet of openness to experience. As we have seen, this personality trait also involves an active imagination (fantasy) and attentiveness to inner feelings. These are personality traits that overlap with aspects of trait empathy and the fact that listeners with these characteristics enjoy sad music does not suggest that music is appreciated simply as contentless form. One study has found that when experimenters test for trait empathy, openness to experience is not significantly correlated with enjoyment of sad music (Huron and Vuoskoski, 2020).

The fact that fantasy and empathetic concern, but not personal distress and perspective taking, are the sub-traits associated with enjoyment of sad music seems particularly significant. Individuals who are not strongly inclined to adopt the perspective of others and feel their distress will not have an especially intense experience of sadness as a response to sad music. On the other hand, individuals who can vividly imagine the circumstances of others and have strong empathetic reactions will be inclined to feel empathy and feeling empathy, as already noted, is a positive experience.

### **Mood congruency**

Psychological studies of the experience of sad music frequently reveal that listeners prefer to listen to “mood congruent” music. That is, listeners who are feeling sad tend to prefer listening to sad music and listeners in a happy state are inclined to listen to happy music (Taruffi and Koelsch, 2014; DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman, 2015). Sizer’s hypothesis is unable to account for the tendency of listeners to favour mood congruent music. In contrast, a hypothesis that posits that listeners experience music as a persona or even a virtual friend, seems better placed to explain this phenomenon.

Psychologists have hypothesised that “once an intimate relationship of love, friendship, or trust is lost or broken and people experience the resulting negative feelings, they often look for a surrogate to recapture the social bond” (Lee, Andrade and Palmer: 2013: 383). They have suggested, moreover, that sad music can be a surrogate friend who can empathise with the listeners who have experienced interpersonal loss. Others studies have corroborated the finding that individuals feeling sadness associated with “interpersonal loss” (that is, sadness resulting from difficulties with relationships with other people) exhibit an increased preference for mood-congruent music (DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman, 2015). It is unclear that Lee et al. are right when they say that listeners are seeking a surrogate friend who will feel empathy with them. DeMarco, Taylor and Friedman agree, however, that “music is quite often more than merely an abstract pattern of sounds, but a form of virtual social interaction” (2015: 88). Perhaps, the explanation is that listeners are seeking virtual people with whom they can empathise or sympathise, as other psychologists have suggested. What does seem clear, however, is that the sort of solution to the paradox of sad music proposed by Sizer does not predict the preference that sad people and, in particular people whose sadness is associated with interpersonal loss, display for sad music.

### **The prolactin conjecture**

One more aspect of Sizer’s solution to the paradox of sad music remains to be discussed. She notes that prolactin may play a role in explaining the enjoyment of sad music. This *prolactin hypothesis* was, as Sizer notes, first advanced by Huron (2011). Prolactin is the protein that enables mammals to lactate, but also produces “feelings of tranquillity, calmness, or consolation” (Huron, 2011, 152). It is released following sexual intercourse and contributes to sexual satisfaction. Huron conjectured that prolactin is released during the experience of sad music and this release helps explain why listeners will willingly listen to music that arouses sadness. In effect, Huron hypothesized that the release of prolactin gives rise to pleasure that compensates listeners for the experience of sadness. Sizer endorses this hypothesis and she was not the only person to do so. It was also welcomed by Young (2014). Unfortunately, the prolactin conjecture turns out to be unfounded.

Unfortunately, the empirical evidence does not provide consistent support for the prolactin hypothesis. A recent study, of which Sizer could not have known, does not indicate that prolactin levels

rise when listening to sad music. This study, in which Huron participated, found that almost all subjects self-reported that they were saddened by sad music and self-reported pleasure markedly dropped. However, blood tests indicated that, on average, prolactin levels remained stable (Ladinig et al., 2019). This study made no effort to find a correlation between trait empathy and enjoyment of sad music but it did confirm that enjoyment of sad music is associated with openness to experience.

The prolactin hypothesis has received some empirical support from another study but the support seems to count against Sizer's hypothesis rather than for it. Sittler, Cooper and Montag (2019) confirmed that empathy plays a role in experience of emotions while listening to sad music. Sittler et al. also found a correlation between the PRL gene (which codes for prolactin) and the experience of emotion while listening to sad music. They did not find a correlation between empathy and the PRL gene but other studies have found a relationship between the PRL gene and empathic (Neumann 2009) responses.

If a correlation between prolactin and empathy, on the one hand, and enjoyment of sad music, on the other, can be established, this would count against Sizer's position. Such a correlation would suggest that the focus of listeners' attention is not the "intricacies of the music" (Sizer 2019, 263), but something in the music that prompts an empathetic response and which prompts the release of prolactin. Formal properties of music do not seem likely to arouse empathy or have, as a possible consequence, the release of prolactin.

## Conclusion

Experience of sad music is a complex phenomenon and the explanation of the pleasure that listeners take in this experience will also be complex. Likely listeners value the experience of sad music for a variety of reasons. These may include appreciation of music's formal properties, but a satisfactory resolution to the paradox of sad music is likely to make reference to other rewards. It is certainly possible that some listeners enjoy sad music because the sadness evoked by sad music enables them to better focus on the formal properties of music. At this point, however, such a view is speculative and does not enjoy empirical support. Worse, Sizer's hypothesis is unable to account for some observed phenomena, including the strong correlations between enjoyment of sad music and trait empathy. In contrast, other accounts of the enjoyment of sad music enjoy empirical support and are able to account for more phenomena.

*University of Victoria, Canada*

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# Experiential Aesthetics: Humility, Ineffability, and Music

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JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN

**Abstract:** In *Music and the Ineffable* (1961), Vladimir Jankélévitch argued that music can elicit endless talk, but such talk gives nothing back to the music. The experience of music remains *sui generis* and ineffable; while analysis and interpretation can be beneficial, they do not change this stubborn fact. Thus, writings about music should be anchored in humility. Just as the scientist and theologian stand in awe before their subjects, hoping to learn something but accepting that mysteries lie beyond their reach, so too should music scholars recognize the limits of their craft. This paper suggests that experiential aesthetics, which centers real-time experience over after-the-fact analysis, provides a humbling corrective to intellectual approaches to aesthetics, which give priority to rational artistic assessments.

**Keywords:** Experientialism, theology, mysticism, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Rudolf Otto, Hasidism

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” This aphorism, attributed variously to Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Frank Zappa, Elvis Costello, and George Carlin (Hartse 2022, 4), assumes a certain futility or incoherence in trying to describe one medium with another. An early articulation of this assumption appeared in the *New Republic* in 1918: “writing about music is as illogical as singing about economics” (cited in Hartse 2022, 4). In truth, one can write *about* music (or dance *about* architecture), sometimes to great effect, adding an interpretation, describing qualities, offering technical insights, or drawing out some latent meaning. Indeed, it seems the more intense the experience, the more one seeks to understand it, turning to analogy or metaphor or pulling from an analytical toolbox. Yet, such musings should not be mistaken for the *thing itself*. As art historian Bernard Berenson (1954) opined, during the “aesthetic moment” a spectator or auditor can feel as though they “had been initiated into illuminating, exalting, formative mysteries” and achieved a “moment of mystic vision” (93). Interpreting this experience or attempting to retrieve some of the “magic” can be helpful and rewarding; but, as the aphorism suggests, music can only truly be experienced as music.

A central paradox of aesthetics is the desire to join sensation, rooted in experience, and judgment, grounded in reason and logic. Aesthetics, after all, derives from the ancient Greek term *aisthesis*, meaning perception or awareness through the senses, as opposed to intellectual concepts or rational knowledge (*noesis*) (Poteat 1993, 24). No matter how detailed, compelling, or well-researched the aesthetic judgment might be, it does not always or necessarily line up with an individual’s response—otherwise there could be “second-hand opinions about beauty” or “experts on beauty who had never experienced the things they described” (Scruton 2011, 7). Again, this does not negate analytical efforts, whether prescriptive or descriptive. A bibliography of nearly 200 English-language books on aesthetics is proof of the robustness of, and interest in, such studies (Friedmann 2018, 155–164). Rather, the point is that while the study of aesthetics relies on experience, experience does not require aesthetic examination. Real-time engagement (“heart”) occurs independent of interpretation (“mind”) (Van Ess 2007, 3).



This “perhaps naïve and obvious fact” (Trela 1974, 1) is at the root of *experiential aesthetics*, a term defined here as the “resort to concrete experience, whether perceptual, intuitive, activist, axiological, or mystical, as the source of truth” (Runes 1942, 103). With reference to science, theology, and musicology, this paper argues that an experientialist approach can add a healthy dose of humility to evaluating musical aesthetics.

### Humility

At the beginning of this century, the John Templeton Foundation, a philanthropy that promotes efforts to “affirm life’s spiritual dimensions,” investigate “big questions,” and explore “the intersection of science and religion,” brought together ten scientists to discuss *humility theology*—a worldview that, in the words of founder Sir John Marks Templeton (2000), recognizes that scientists “will never reach an end of learning, and some are even talking about other sources of truth—philosophy and especially theology—as crucial components in the search for reality” and that “Every person’s concept of God is too small” (vii). Both science and theology, the argument goes, exist in an atmosphere of awe and wonder, and thus share a baseline of humility. More an ideal than always a reality (there are plenty of unwavering and absolutist scientists and theologians), this paradigm is, at the very least, a helpful reminder of the limits of human knowledge.

Various religious traditions hold tensions between knowing and unknowing, certainty and doubt. An example from the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic sayings, arguments, and counter-arguments on theology and law, describes an encounter between third-century Rabbi Hanina bar Hama and a man who “extended his prayer and said: God, the great, mighty, awesome, powerful, mighty, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast and honored.” After the man finished his prayer, Rabbi Hanina scolded him: “All of the praises we could possibly lavish upon the Lord are nothing but a few silver dinars relative to many thousands of gold dinars. Reciting a litany of praise does not enhance God’s honor” (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 33b). This sort of reasoning has led mystics and theologians to favor “silence in the face of mystery” (Saliers 2007, 72), opt for *negative theology*—statements about what God *is not*, rather than what God *is* (Brown and Simmons 2019)—or embrace an *evolving theology*, which views all theological assertions as “tiny beginnings of humankind’s comprehension” (Templeton 2000, viii).

The latter position resonates in the science fields, where humility is (ideally) a companion of curiosity. *Intellectual humility*, or transparency about the limitations of one’s work and an openness to being corrected, is essential to scientific discovery—so much so that guidelines have been drafted to aid scientists and science publications bypass the human impulse to be absolutely certain, and to foreground flaws in submitted papers to alert reviewers and readers (Hoekstra and Vazire 2021). Charles Darwin modeled intellectual humility over a century-and-a-half ago in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Not only was Darwin reluctant to publish the groundbreaking opus (his *HMS Beagle* voyage ended over twenty years earlier), but he also included several passages admitting imperfections, highlighting gaps in his evidence, and respectfully dialoguing with established theories, which his work would ultimately supersede (Oakes 2007).

As Darwin demonstrated, humility and discovery can and should be intertwined. Instead of causing paralyzing feelings of smallness, the vastness of nature and the cosmos are invitations to learn and wonder more. Celebrated science educator and humanist Carl Sagan (2006) put it this way: “I believe it is true that humility is the only just response in a confrontation with the universe, but not a humility that prevents us from seeking the nature of the universe we are admiring” (31). If God exists, Sagan speculated, “He or She or It or whatever the appropriate pronoun is” would surely smile on those who “admire the real universe in all its intricacies” and shun “the sodden blockhead who worships while understanding nothing” (31). Science, then, is a type of “informed worship,” translating reverence and admiration into a search for knowledge, however limited. In this sense, humility is more than the virtue upon which all others depend, as many ethicists contend (Wright 2019). It is also the foundation of all human understanding: religious, scientific, and everything else.

## Ineffability

Philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch applied this view to music in his treatise, *Music and the Ineffable* (2003; originally published as *La Musique et l'Ineffable* in 1961). Arguing that “Music was not invented to be talked about” (79), Jankélévitch saw music literature as a one-way pursuit: music elicits words, but words add nothing to music. Yet, instead of invalidating such discourse as a fruitless waste of time or energy, music’s indescribability “unleashes a state of verve” that stirs endless and “infinitely equivocal” talk (72). Jankélévitch stressed that although interpretation and analysis are always subjective and variable, and should never be confused with the music itself—just as a printed score or material object (record, CD, file, etc.) are not themselves music—these tools can help deepen our understanding of a phenomenon that transcends the bounds of even the most sophisticated language. Commenting on Jankélévitch’s own richly descriptive musicological analysis, Steven Rings (2012) observes that the “combination of pointing and highly evocative figural language” does not simply draw out features of the music, but also “constitutes a linguistic performance” that “directs the reader’s ears toward the music in question and urges that it be experienced in certain ways” (220). Jankélévitch was well aware of this manipulative property of language, including his own use of it, thus furthering the point that *experiencing* music and *interpreting* music, either before or after listening, are two different things.

Instructively, Jankélévitch connected music, the ineffable subject of musicology, and God, the ineffable subject of theology: “no one truly speaks of God, above all, not theologians. . . . Alas, music in itself is an unknowable something, as unable to be grasped as the mystery of artistic creation—a mystery that can only ever be grasped ‘before and after’” (102). Modernist composer and conductor Pierre Boulez remarked similarly that music can become clear through study, but in its performance remains a mystery (Cobussen 2008, 128). Philosopher and literary critic George Steiner (1989) chimed in: “No musicology, no music criticism can tell us as much as the action of meaning which is performance” (8). Affirming that music only exists when it is performed, composer Paul Hindemith (1953) wrote: “An individual piece of music, being many times reborn and going through ever renewed circles of resonant life, through repeated performance, dies as many deaths at the end of each of its phoenixlike resurrections” (1). Philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1964) questioned if anything felt during an orchestral performance continues after the music stops: “Its somatic effects are transient, and its moral hangovers or uplifts seem to be negligible” (181). And yet, the experience of music stimulates much writing and discussion, which can get us close to understanding, but should be tempered by the fact that full apprehension is outside our reach. Jankélévitch explained it thus: “[S]imple listening, or performing per se, is far more effective than the most striking intellectual insights. Listening to music creates a state of grace in the blink of an eye, where long pages of poetic metaphors would not suffice. As irrationalist as this conclusion may seem, we need to accede to it” (119).

To be sure, such musings have Romantic undertones—favoring emotion over reason and subjectivity over objectivity (Lockhead 2012, 234)—and the type of music alluded to, while left unidentified, is implicitly Western concert music. Jankélévitch wrote books on Fauré (1938), Ravel (1939), and Debussy (1949), and discussed these composers in *Music and the Ineffable*. Clearly, he did not have a pop or children’s tune in mind when he wrote that “Listening gives us a glimpse of ineffable Kitezh [mythical city of Russian legend]” (2003, 119). Still, might there be some inscrutable sublimity in even the simplest music or most modest performance? Can the experience of music in all its forms point to something inexplicable, even if it does not inspire “endless talk”? Is there an empirical way to label which music deserves this lofty status and which music does not? Or does humility compel us to avoid such categorizing? Can we apply Jankélévitch’s ideas to *all* music? Is music, in the generic, a “signal of transcendence” (Conti and Stetson 2008)?

Just as Jankélévitch used a theological analogy to stress that music is outside our conceptual grasp, so did Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto include musical analogies in his influential tome, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923; originally published as *Das Heilige* in 1917). Otto divided religious phenomena into

two categories. The first is the *numinous* or “wholly other”: an encounter with a “truly ‘mysterious’ object” that is “beyond our comprehension,” “whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own,” and “whose special character we can feel, without being able to give it clear conceptual expression” (28, 30). The second is *rationalization*, or attempts to put the numinous into words and replicate it in ritual. Rationalization yields mythologies, texts, practices, and dogmas, but these should not be confused with the “*sui generis* and irreducible” encounter on which they are based; “like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while [the holy] admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined” (7).

As with an all-consuming, in-the-moment encounter with music or the cosmos, spiritual *knowing*—a non-rational, intuitive, unarticulatable state—and *understanding*—a rational, approximate, intellectualized interpretation—are not the same, and can be “mutually exclusive and contrasted” (Otto 1923, 135). Put differently, although Otto cautioned against equating numinous experiences with mere emotions—especially since emotion terms are themselves approximations—the holy is in some sense perceived through “embodied thoughts” (Rosaldo 1984, 143) or the “mindful body” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), which process stimuli in a way that cannot be adequately put into words. The body has its own non-rational means of perception that can, and often does, escape cognitive appraisal (Thagard 2010, 98).

Significantly, Otto compared this ever-present theological impediment to what music scholars face when waxing on their subject: “[T]he object of religious awe or reverence . . . cannot be fully determined conceptually: it is non-rational, as is the beauty of a musical composition, which no less eludes complete conceptual analysis” (59). In this way, music is also “wholly other,” as Christopher I. Lehrich (2014) explains in an analysis of Otto: “Music is not mimetic, representational, expressive, or communicative in any plausible sense of these terms” (28). Again, Otto had a certain type of elevated Western music in mind; but the notion of music being experienced first and rationalized later—and music not being equivalent to labels ascribed to it—is arguably universal.

Using Bach’s celebrated Mass in B Minor as an illustrative case in point, Otto maintained that while some music can “express the *mysterium* by way of imitation,” it has no “positive way to express ‘the holy’” (70). Thus, while both music and the holy are profoundly experiential and ultimately mysterious—and, as such, can be useful homologies for one another—they are *not* each other, nor are they anything else. Otto captured this in a quote he attributed to eighteenth-century hymnist Gerhard Tersteegen: “A God comprehended is no God” (25). Is it likewise true that music comprehended (i.e., satisfactorily described in words) is not music? The very possibility should keep us humble before the sound.

### Experientialism

The foregoing discussion has relevance for musical aesthetics: the philosophical reflection on the nature, meaning, purpose, and quality of music, its performance, and its reception. If music is meant to be experienced and is only secondarily subjected to aesthetic assessment, then *experiential aesthetics*, which values real-time perceptual and intuitive musical responses as a source of truth, should be regarded as the aesthetics from which all others derive. In contrast to intellectual approaches to aesthetics, which favor conscious associations and meticulous artistic appraisals, experiential aesthetics looks primarily at subconscious, organic, intuitive appreciations (Friedmann 2018, 5). Of course, the nature of such responses depends on cultural exposure and conditioning, internalized norms and expectations, and personal tastes and associations regarding musical styles and qualities; but the experience of the music is, in the moment of listening, non-rational and separate from analytical understanding. Following Jankélévitch and Otto, an experientialist position contends that reactions to musical stimuli are more immediate and more important than the terms used to describe them.

At its core, experiential aesthetics deals with the relationship between music and perception. Rather than judging whether or not a musical piece is “beautiful” (or some other quality), or why one

piece is better or more aesthetically successful than another, attention shifts to the interplay between music and the spontaneous realm of sensations—a focus that reconnects to the root term *aisthesis* (“sensation” or “perception”) (Poteat 1993, 24). To be sure, all avenues of aesthetics must begin with experience: a person engages with an artwork (or natural phenomenon or something else), which produces sensations that are typically felt as distinct from those achieved by other means. An especially intense or transformative experience might be described as “awe” or “wonder” (Palmer 2008, 394–395). An objectivist will examine aspects of the object that triggered the response, while a subjectivist will assess the response itself. Some combination of the two is probably necessary for making informed aesthetic claims; however, they are both removed from the experience itself and, as such, incomplete. Experiential aesthetics, as applied in this paper, reminds us that all talk about music issues from basic experiences that occur before and stand apart from linguistic rationalization, however enlightened.

Composer Aaron Copland (1953) touched on this in his essay on the “gifted listener,” or one who combines the acumen of a trained musician with the instincts of a layperson:

I like this idea that we respond to music from a primal and almost brutish level—dumbly, as it were, for on that level we are firmly grounded. On that level, whatever the music may be, we experience basic reactions such as tension and release, density and transparency, a smooth or angry surface, the music’s swelling and subsidings, its pushing forward and bringing back, its length, its speed, its thunders and whisperings—and a thousand other psychologically based reflections of our physical life of movement and gesture, and our inner, subconscious mental life. That is fundamentally the way we all hear music—gifted and ungifted alike—and all the analytical, historical, textual material on or about the music heard, interesting though it may be, cannot—and I venture to say should not—alter that fundamental relationship (13–14).

Copland’s emphasis on the primacy of experience was specifically aimed at the professional musician, who devotes countless hours to studying, practicing, and analyzing music and, because of this absorption, tends to lose sight of the “primal and almost brutish” way we all hear music. This can also be read as a reflective self-examination. Copland’s own extraordinary ability to compose, conduct, and write about music of the highest artistic and technical complexity undoubtedly caused him to overlook, from time to time, music’s experiential essence. In a 1964 article published in *Billboard*, Copland admitted that the hard work, training, and creativity that goes into an orchestral piece is often rejected the moment it reaches the listener’s ears. “Composers tend to assume that everyone loves music,” he wrote. “Surprisingly enough, everyone doesn’t” (10).

This sort of spontaneous, usually unarticulated, aesthetic response affirms the experientialist position that, whatever a piece’s compositionally or culturally intended meaning or value, the listener’s instant, non-rational, gut-level response is not beholden to it. Philosopher of aesthetics Roger Scruton (2011) elaborated on this: “There is no way that you can argue me into a judgement that I have not made for myself, nor can I become an expert in beauty, simply by studying what others have said about beautiful objects, and without experiencing and judging for myself” (5). No matter how reasonable, articulate, or compelling the opinion of a critic, philosopher, colleague, or friend might be, judgment occurs in experience. Nonetheless, as with science and theology, the singular, ineffable moment does not preclude or exclude analysis or rich descriptions—either before or after listening—and can, in fact, encourage us to explore and seek understanding (*à la* Jankélévitch). Rather, the takeaway is this: such pursuits should be done with humility.

### Case Study: *Hasidic Niggunim*

The dictum to be humble before the sound is not limited to listening. It is true for performers as well—those who are at the same time makers and auditors. The centrality of experience is a defining aspect of Hasidic Jewish songs, which unite music and theology—putting the analogies of Jankélévitch and Otto into practice—and shift our attention from concert works to folk melodies. Hasidism

emerged in Eastern Europe around 1750 as a populist mystical movement opposed to the rigid academicism of rabbinic Judaism. Among its innovations was heightening the *mitzvah* (commandment) to be joyful in daily life, especially through song and dance. Musicologist Hanoach Avenary (1979) linked this prioritization, which inspired wordless ecstatic singing, to the conviction that language could not adequately achieve or communicate a spiritual state: “Words were regarded as a medium which was insufficient for grasping the secrets of cabbalistic theosophy, and for the exalted feelings of union with the endless and absolute.” (158).

Avenary offered several Hasidic sayings alluding to this belief, including “Silence is better than words, but singing is better than silence” and “There are castles in the upper spheres which open only to song” (158). Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1750), the founder of Hasidism, taught that melody enables greater spiritual expression than liturgical prayer, and that *niggunim*—melodies usually sung with nonsense vocables (e.g., “ai di di dai”) and sometimes with repeated Yiddish or Hebrew “mantras” (Vinaver 1985, 191–242)—circumvent the inherent poverty of language (Barzilai 2009, 57). Such singing, according to Avenary, is meant to “express the unexpressible, to give voice to that which is too intimate to be uttered in word” (159).

These sayings and observations capture the experiential nature of *niggunim*. Devotion takes precedence over aesthetic values; melodic features and vocal quality are of little importance. In fact, the spontaneous style of singing means that no two performances of a tune are the same, even when sung by the same person (Schleifer 1985, 20). The sole measure of “aesthetic success” (Scruton 2011, 13) is the ecstasy of the moment, called *deveikut* (“clinging to God”). *Niggunim* are thus not sung to affect others, nor do they aspire for external beauty: “Only by means of participation can their ravishing, moving, exalting power be realized” (Avenary 1979, 180). This does not mean that tools of analysis cannot or should not be applied. However, as vehicles for numinous encounters, *niggunim* aim toward the “wholly other,” not the scrutiny of the critic or musicologist.

Experientialism is also reflected in the makeup of the tunes themselves. Hasidism maintains that God is in all things and, as such, is the source of all melodies. This theological claim is actionized in *tikkun* (“repairing”), whereby secular or non-Jewish melodies are purified and restored to a spiritual state through singing them as *niggunim*, either without words or with new religious lyrics (a process known as contrafaction). A number of *niggunim* are ascribed to rabbis or musicians, but many others were borrowed from pre-existing tunes: Polish military marches, Central European waltzes, Cossack dances, Eastern European folk tunes, etc. “Redeeming the soul” of these tunes was itself considered a *mitzvah*, and was engaged in with utmost religious conviction (Jacobson 2010, 227).

The Habad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism, founded by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), developed a four-step process of *tikkun*. First, the person must identify the “holy spark” dormant in a melody. Second, the person must spend time with the song, creating a sense of ownership. Third, the original lyrics must be abandoned. Fourth, the repurposed song must be sung with proper religious intention (Koskoff 2001, 77–78). Central to this process is a belief that once a song is redeemed, it is no longer connected to its former state. There are numerous stories illustrating this thorough transformation. In one, Rabbi Shneur Zalman comes upon an organ grinder singing a beautiful song. The rabbi tosses some coins at the street musician and asks him to repeat the song over and over. Eventually, the rabbi sings the song himself, imbuing it with religious fervor and erasing its original lyrics. Witnessing this, the organ grinder loses his ability to sing the original song (Koskoff 2001, 75). Another legend involves Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik Taub of Kaliv (1744–1821), who is walking through a Ukrainian forest. He hears a shepherd singing a song of longing for his lost love. The rabbi meditates on the melody and internalizes it, replacing its secular love lyrics with words of longing for the mystical divine presence. When the rabbi asks the shepherd to sing the song again, he cannot (Rubin 1963, 247).

As fantastical as these and similar stories might be—and as culturally and theologically specific as Hasidic mystical-musical conceptions are—they nonetheless center the experiential nature of music



in universally applicable ways. Through the inclusive, “anything goes” use of melodies, and the insistence that aesthetic judgments are essentially superfluous, Hasidic *niggunim* illustrate a general principle: music exists in the experience of it. Music remains ineffable, and so is used to commune with an ineffable God; and yet, neither the music nor the deity is made more comprehensible in the process.

*Academy for Jewish Religion, California, USA*

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# *Phantasia*: Epistemology into Music<sup>1</sup>

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ANDREAS DORSCHER

**Abstract:** Western musical practices have been wedded to ‘theory’, in particular philosophy, since Classical Antiquity. Studying the connection can shed light on both. The notion of *phantasia* (to use the Greek form of the term) offers a fascinating case study. Derived from *phainesthai*, ‘to appear’, *phantasia* was originally a technical term of classical Greek epistemology (Plato, Aristotle), refined through distinction in Late Antiquity (Augustine). Medieval music theorists then applied the latter version to imagined sounds. During the Renaissance, the notion was further developed to designate practices of musical improvisation. These then crystallized into compositions; from the 16th century on, *fantasia*, *fantasy*, *Phantasie* has turned into the name of a musical genre. In that genre, the long-winded transformation from (and of) epistemology into music has left just a trace of the former – but a trace that has endured over two-thousand years and has even branched out east- and southwards (Türkiye, Arabia, India) is still something.

**Keywords:** *Phantasia*, fantasy, imagination, image, epistemology, music, appearance, invention, improvisation, style, genre, freedom, the picturesque, *takhyil*, *khyal*

## Platonic origin

Western musical practices have been wedded to ‘theory’, in particular philosophy, since Classical Antiquity. Studying the connection can shed light on both. An illuminating example is provided by the story of *phantasia*, an expression that turned from an epistemological term in Classical Greek philosophy into the name of a musical genre. In reality, it is a long story, ranging over more than two-thousand years.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of a journal article, it must be cut short.

The story, in essence, is this. The Greek noun *phantasia* is derived from the verb *phainesthai*, ‘to appear’. Yet the noun does not designate what appears. Rather, *phantasia* refers to a capacity: the ability to make something appear. Originally, it is not proposed as part of a theory of art. Rather, the term and the concept, Platonic innovations, belong to epistemology. Before Plato, philosophers did not distinguish between the outward sense impression and the inner image of that impression. This distinction is correlated to the Platonic contrast of *aisthēsis* and *phantasia*. *Aisthēsis* is passive, it happens to us; *phantasia*, by way of contrast, is active: making something of what has happened to us. Fantasy here, unlike a later meaning in English, is not at all the dream that lifts you off from what there is, but rather the very appropriation of what there is. Nonetheless, the same situation will appear (*phainetai*) different to different people.<sup>3</sup> The differences point to the role of their own contribution; the power to make such a contribution, then, is *phantasia*. Putting a specific interpretation on it, we might call it the capacity for representation. *Phantasia* works “through perception”, *di’ aisthēseōs*,<sup>4</sup> but goes beyond it.<sup>5</sup> As the mind is not a waxen tablet onto which the world simply stamps itself,<sup>6</sup> the active contribution is necessary if we are ever to arrive at something that deserves the name *epistēmē*, ‘knowledge’. Nevertheless, Plato’s talk of *phantasia* is not free from suspicion, spurred by the decisive criterion of truth. As the term *phantasia* derives from *phainesthai*, it inherits from that verb a semantic ambiguity: *phainesthai* can refer to the act of appearing or to the state of merely seeming to be

in a certain way, i.e., either to becoming obvious or to deceiving the beholder. In *Republic X*, the book that became famous, or infamous, for the expulsion of most art and poetry from the ideal state, Plato claims that images could be imitations of phantoms or of real things (literally: of the truth): *phantasmatos ē alētheias ousa mimēsis*.<sup>7</sup> Truth (*alētheia*) and the product of *phantasia* (a *phantasma*) here form an alternative. Augustine would later elaborate on this idea. Such suspicion, however, is not the message at large which, rather, grants a constructive role to *phantasia*. This was the lead that Plato's student Aristotle would take up.

### Aristotelian elaboration, Augustinian revision

When *phantasia*, the power to make appear, has done its work on *aisthēsis*, the result will be *phantasmata*. Aristotle claims that the soul never thinks without *phantasmata*.<sup>8</sup> *Phantasia* transposes what has been perceived by the senses, the *aisthēma*, into a mental image,<sup>9</sup> *phantasma*. It is thus placed between the senses and the intellect, and leads from the former to the latter.<sup>10</sup> There is a hiatus between perception and conception that needs to be bridged; this is what *phantasia* achieves.<sup>11</sup>

As the focus is going to move on to music in due course, the notion of a mental image seems unpropitious for the project of a history of the idea. The Greek word *phainesthai*, though, does not imply such a preference for the visual.<sup>12</sup> Yet that twist gets incorporated in the terms as well, once the Greek philosophical terminology is latinized. Thus Cicero, in the 1st century BC, translates the Greek term as Latin *visum*, 'that which has been seen'. More than a century later, Quintilian's rendering of *phantasia* is *visio*, 'sight'. Thus, at least, he restores the original active sense of the Greek term that had been lost in Cicero. Much later, from Calcidius who translated the first part of Plato's *Timaus* into Latin during the 4th century, to Boëthius in the 6th century, *imaginatio*, the "ability to make images", became the standard Latin translation of Greek *phantasia*.<sup>13</sup> Whether along the line of Cicero and Quintilian, or that of Calcidius and Boëthius, the terms themselves indicate now that we operate with what can be seen rather than that which can be heard. Given the place of rhetoric in Roman culture, that may come as a surprise; but that same culture also entertained a fundamental bias in favour of the eye rather than the ear – a bias that proved to be the dominant force in shaping the idea.

On a systematic account, rather than along the historical narrative, *imaginatio* remains a rather heavy-handed rendering of *phantasia*. While 'the image' is already present in Plato's and Aristotle's discussions of *phantasia*, a capacity to make appear should not be restricted to images. One ought to be able to make sounds appear, perhaps even smells or tastes. It was the rule rather than the exception that meanings were bent once Greek philosophy entered the Roman world. Unusually, however, in the case of *phantasia* a Latin transliteration of the Greek word would co-exist with the Latin translation *imaginatio*.<sup>14</sup> There never was a clear demarcation between both terms.<sup>15</sup> In discussions of *phantasia* no less than in those of *imaginatio*, talk of images prevails.

Augustine, the 4th century church father, is a case in point. Mental images, he notes, do not always manifest an actual perception; they also emerge freely, in dreams, for instance, or in active phantasizing, as in the attempt to imagine something, such as a dragon. Along that line, Augustine, latinizing Greek terms, distinguishes *phantasmata* from *phantasiae*. By *phantasma* he now refers to an artificially created image in the mind, of something that has not been perceived. *Phantasia* in Augustine, by way of contrast, is the image of something perceived, stored in memory (*memoria*).<sup>16</sup> This implies a hierarchy. *Phantasma*, for Augustine, is below *phantasia*, as the latter instructs us about reality, whereas the former deceives or, at least, can deceive, and, at any rate, is not based on reality. Yet it is clear that Augustine's conceptual distinction (foreshadowed in Plato) could pave the way for a transvaluation of terms along the following line: *Phantasia* merely copies elements of the world, while in *phantasmata* the mind displays its productive power, creating things that do not exist. A millenium after Augustine, the Renaissance implemented that transvaluation.<sup>17</sup>

### Late Middle Ages and Renaissance: Three levels of musical *phantasia*

How was that transvaluation put into effect for music? *Phantasia* or *fantasia*, as it is sometimes spelled in medieval Latin, entered that art on three levels:

- (1) as a presupposition: the productive faculty of imagination and invention,
- (2) as a performance: phantasizing, the process of improvisation, and
- (3) as a result: a work, called a ‘fantasia’ or ‘phantasy’.

These three key ideas require some explication and clarification.

**Ad 1.** – The first meaning was related to music already during the late medieval period. Around 1300, theoreticians such as Guy de Saint Denis in his *Tractatus de tonis*<sup>18</sup> and Johannes de Grocheio in his *Ars musica*<sup>19</sup> connect *phantasia* with music. A striking, albeit somewhat special, example in Johannes de Grocheio’s treatise runs as follows:

Sed Lambertus et alii istos modos ad novem ampliaverunt ex novem instrumentis naturalibus fantasmias adsumentes.

But Lambert and others extended those modes to nine, drawing the *fantasia* from the nine natural instruments.

The remark is preceded by a detailed discussion why Johannes de Garlandia and other theorists before Lambert had distinguished six modes. Lambert, like Johannes de Grocheio himself a music theorist, becomes an innovator in his art as he introduces nine modes. He does so and can do so only by virtue of his ability to produce a mental image. The image is not a fantasy in the modern sense; rather it is backed up by what, allegedly, had already been there, in nature (*natura*). A strong medieval sense prevails that man must not be called creative; only God is creator. Nevertheless, Lambert’s innovation is, to put it in contemporary jargon, groundbreaking.<sup>20</sup> Most uses of *fantasia* are not; for these more mundane, but – for the history of the idea – more relevant cases, Guy de Saint Denis and Johannes de Grocheio view and present *fantasia* as a prerequisite of musical practice: Musicians must be able to imagine sequences of tones in the mind in order to be able to make music. It is just one step from here to say that a musician invents a sequence of tones freely, and in doing so manifests *phantasia*.

**Ad 2.** – There is no evidence of the second meaning during the Middle Ages; it seems to be a new coining of the Renaissance period. *Phantasia* in that second understanding refers to processes of phantasizing on musical instruments: the extemporizing of an individual player, for instance on a vihuela, that Spanish plucked instrument of the 16th century, shaped like a guitar, but tuned like a lute. A pertinent treatise of 1565, by Tomás de Santa María, a composer, theorist, church organist and Dominican monk originally from Madrid, bears the title *Arte de tañer fantasía, assi para tecla como para vihuela, y todo instrume[n]to, en que pudiere tañer a tres, y a quatro voces*<sup>21</sup>. Such a “fantasía” can be played, literally touched – *tañer* derives from Latin *tangere* –, a phrase that would make no sense with regard to the first meaning, i.e., *phantasia* as a capacity.

Like every process, *phantasia* in the second sense has a beginning and an end – again in sharp contrast to the first meaning, where *phantasia* designated a mental faculty. Philosophically, the underlying distinction is Aristotle’s contrast of potency (*dynamis*) and act (*energeia*),<sup>22</sup> common currency due to the scholastic heritage. The capacity is always there, whereas the deed occurs here and now, filling a determinate stretch of time. There is also a connection between both meanings, via the wide notion of freedom. The freedom of the first sense of *phantasia* was the freedom of invention, in contrast to discovery – which is bound by what there is. A *phantasia* (Castilian language: *fantasia*) in the second sense, however, will be considered free in another sense: as an instrumental practice that has liberated itself from traditional models of either dance music or vocal music. *Vis-à-vis* the latter, performance in the way of *phantasia* is not just free

from a text made up of words, but also free from the templates shaped by such texts even for structuring instrumental music.

**Ad 3.** – When a piece of instrumental music is titled *phantasia*, we encounter the word's third meaning. It emerged at the same time as the second, with the rise of music printing. During the early 16th century, *phantasias* by Luis Milán were published at Valencia, those of Giovanni Antonio Castelione at Milan, those of Hans Neusidler at Nuremberg. Those who composed *phantasias* in early modern western and central Europe had a predilection for plucked instruments, then keyboard instruments. Early *phantasias* often attribute a specific function to the piece: *Praeludium*, *Preambulum*, *Prooemium*, *Intonatio*, *Intrada*. In Neusidler's case, *Preambel* and *Fantasey* are used interchangeably. The *phantasy* is not the real thing, but merely what leads up to it. The 'real thing' is governed by strict form. In spite of such reservation, the genre heads to an apex early on, around and after 1600, in England, in the Netherlands, Italy and Austria. Elizabethan England also provided its early theorist, Thomas Morley:

The most and chieftest kind of music which is made without a ditty is the Fantasy, that is when a musician taketh a point at his pleasure and wresteth and turneth it as he list, making either much or litle of it as shall seem best in his own conceit. In this may more art be shown than in any other music, because the composer is tied to nothing, but that he may add, diminish an[d] alter at his pleasure. And this kind will bear any allowances whatever tolerable in other music.<sup>23</sup>

As regards the early apex, in the field of composition, John Dowland's *fancies* should be mentioned as well as the keyboard works by William Byrd, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, Girolamo Frescobaldi and Johann Jakob Froberger. The form of their pieces is, due to the negative freedom of *phantasia* pointed out with regard to the word's second meaning, highly individualized; thus we might even hesitate to speak of *phantasia* as a genre, rather than a collective name. Or it could be seen as a style, *stylus phantasticus*;<sup>24</sup> thus in the work of the German polymath Athanasius Kircher, a personal acquaintance of Froberger during his visit to Rome.<sup>25</sup> Kircher calls the "phantastic style" "liberrima, & solutissima componendi methodus",<sup>26</sup> "the most free, most independent method of composition".

### A genre that is no genre

What the musical concept, in all its three meanings, inherited from the epistemological concept, then, were ideas of freedom of play.<sup>27</sup> Augustine deemed the liberty and playfulness of phantasms dangerous to the soul; the Renaissance, since Marsilio Ficino, cherished the fruitfulness of imagination's free, ludic character.<sup>28</sup> Freedom remained the hallmark of the phantasy as a genre that is no genre, in its unique career during the two centuries after Kircher, the 18th and the 19th.<sup>29</sup> To point to its eminence, it suffices to hint at such pinnacles of their respective epochs (the 'Baroque', the 'Classical', the 'Romantic' era) as Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chromatic Phantasia* (c. 1720), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Phantasia* in c minor K 475 (1784), Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Phantasia* in C major D 760 (1822), and Robert Schumann's *Phantasia* in C major op. 17 (1836).

I called the phantasia a genre that is no genre. For it is neither defined by a formal outline or plan, like the sonata or the rondo; nor is it defined by a specific combination of instruments, like the string quartet or the piano trio. While the phantasias I just mentioned are for keyboard instruments, a phantasia, during that epoch – early 18th to early 19th century – could also be for string quartet, like the slow movement, *fantasia*, of Haydn's E-flat major quartet op. 76 no. 6, or for violin and piano like the one by Schubert, from his final year, 1828, D 934, or for piano, choir and orchestra – the case of Beethoven's *Choral Phantasia* op. 80, of 1808. The only feature that defines the phantasia seems to be its indefiniteness.<sup>30</sup>



## Freedom and order

The previous consideration seems to suggest an anarchic status for *phantasia* in music. That impression is by no means far-fetched. Johann Mattheson, a leading German music theorist of the 18th century, wrote:

Noch eine gewisse Gattung, ich weiß nicht ob ich sagen soll der Melodien, oder der musicalischen Grillen, trifft man in der Instrumental-Music an, die von allen übrigen sehr unterschieden ist, in den so genannten [...] Fantasie, oder Fantaisies [...]. Ob nun gleich diese alle das Ansehen haben wollen, als spielte man sie aus dem Stegreife daher, so werden sie doch mehrenteils ordentlich zu Papier gebracht; halten aber so wenig Schrancken und Ordnung, daß man sie schwerlich mit einem andern allgemeinen Nahmen, als guter Einfälle belegen kan. Daher auch ihr Abzeichen die Einbildung ist.<sup>31</sup>

In instrumental music, there is yet another genre of melodies – or should I rather say: of musical caprice? That genre is quite different from all other ones. I am referring here to the so-called [...] *fantasie*, or *fantaisies* [...]. They are meant to give the impression that the performer improvises; nevertheless, most of them have been put on paper in a quite orderly fashion. Yet they commit themselves neither to limits nor to order, so they elude any other general designation than that of a good conceit. Their hallmark is imagination.<sup>32</sup>

In a successful performance, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chromatic Phantasia*<sup>33</sup> presents itself as if improvised; yet it is a written-out composition. That relationship between improvisation ("Stegreif") and paper ("Papier") is not precarious, though. Audiences are aware that the improvisatory character of Bach's fantasy has got the status of an 'as if'. Thus it is a transparent semblance, based on an unwritten contract between performer and listener: 'Let's pretend ...'. Such play within the frame of mutual agreement occurs in a tension between the first and the third of the three meanings of *phantasia* that had been distinguished in the Renaissance: the subjective faculty of imagination and its product on paper, subjectivity turned into an object. There is order on that level ("ordentlich zu Papier gebracht"), the order of script, using musical notation, thus following the (not too tight) conventions that rule the relationship between signs and execution at the instrument.

What might be precarious, though, is something else. For on the next level, that of the composition, Mattheson claims, there seems to be "neither limits nor order" ("so wenig Schrancken und Ordnung"). If, along a basic – though contested – definition music is organized sound, we might even doubt whether the *phantasia*, as understood by Mattheson, still belongs to the realm of music, rather than the chaotic world of noise. That is the question implied by 18th century music theory. What, then, of 18th century musical practice, in the field of composition?

An instructive example – though not one Mattheson could have been aware of – is offered by Mozart's *Phantasia* in c minor K 475.<sup>34</sup> Is it 'without order'? Even for listeners, let alone readers, it is easy to discern, within the flow of music,<sup>35</sup> six sections in different keys. Only the first (bars 1–25) and last of these (bars 161–176) are actually 'in' c minor. Mozart was keen to make the work's audible tonal instability visible as well. He started the manuscript by placing general key signatures, but then erased them.<sup>36</sup> To leave out key signatures was not without precedent. There are no general key signatures in Bach's *Chromatic Phantasia* either; but that work never went into print during the 18th century. Why Mozart acted as he did is not difficult to guess. For one can hardly say that c minor is – as we do indeed say of Mozart's Sonata K 457 – the *phantasia*'s 'main key' ('Haupttonart'). The tone c does not constitute the work's tonal centre. Within the composition, harmonically stable areas – its second and fourth section – are in D major and B-flat major. Contrary to what 18th century listeners might have expected, *viz.* the dominant key – that would be G major – or the parallel key – E-flat major –, the actual keys of the second and fourth section are one full step distant from c. Thus Mozart places keys in the

work as part of a broader conception that is meant to startle the audience by contrasts especially of tempo, metre, register, dynamics and expressive character:

- (1) Bars 1–25: *Adagio*, c minor, 4/4 metre. A lofty slow introduction in the style of grand symphony openings. Low register. Half-close on F-sharp (as dominant of b minor or B major?).
- (2) Bars 26–35: *Adagio*, D major, 4/4 metre. Complete change of musical idiom; instead of the sonata exposition (in b minor or B major) the introduction had prepared us for, we hear a placid little instrumental song. The opening *cantabile* melody is recapitulated in bar 32, this time in higher register. In terms of harmony, the music never drops out of the tonic, subdominant and dominant of D major, thus creating a contrast foil to the chaos that is to follow.
- (3) Bars 36–85: *Allegro*, harmonically unstable, 4/4 metre. A dramatic scene, modulating wildly; starting on the dominant of a minor and ending on the dominant seventh chord of B major, moving through g minor, F major/f minor, D-flat und G-flat/F-sharp major. The piano storms through all registers. Without any connection to the preceding music, suddenly, in bar 58 (accompaniment from bar 56), a *cantabile* ‘second subject’ in F major appears; it is repeated in minor mode. The section terminates in a virtuosic cadenza (bars 82–85).
- (4) Bars 86–124: *Andantino*, B major, 3/4 metre. Once more a sheltered, narrow tonal space, as in (2), yet this time filled with dance rather than song, *viz.*, a rhythmically subtle sarabande. Change from middle register to low register.
- (5) Bars 125–160: *Più allegro*, harmonically unstable, 3/4 metre. *Tremolando* figuration, quick changes in harmony, yet unlike section (3), here the music follows the order of the circle of fifths. The surprise ending is a fall through two octaves into the dark.
- (6) Bars 161–176: *Primo tempo*, c minor, 4/4 metre. An abridged and modified recapitulation of (1) – the only recurrence in the piece –, not as low in register as the beginning.

This sequence is not logical – if ‘logical’ is construed in (perhaps loose) analogy to an inference that leads from premises to conclusion. At the start of each section, we can easily imagine the music to take a turn altogether different from the one that it actually takes, *e.g.*, dance instead of song, song instead of dance, or another distinct option. The end of K 475 circles back to the beginning; yet there is no development towards a goal – quite on the contrary. The first section, *e.g.*, suggests sonata teleology; yet the expectation is frustrated through the song or arietta that follows in the second section. Such disorder, however, is not simply disorder. Rather, it is an order produced in awareness of the order that listeners who were experienced in the style would typically have expected; the composer then counteracts that pattern. Thus he acts in a way completely different from, say, that of a potpourri composer who simply glues together popular melodies that have nothing to do with each other except their popularity.

But there is more to it. The creation of order in K 475 does not merely, in a negative vein, amount to action contrary to expectation – where the expectation that is thwarted through the composition had, positively, implied a logical sequence, broadly construed. The phantasia itself also displays order in a positive sense. It achieves that not in the way of a compelling train of thought, but in the way of a well-proportioned *gestalt*. For our aural sense, there is weight and there is counter-weight. Nothing like logic leads from one section to the next. But precisely because the sections are so disparate, they balance each other: fast *versus* slow, lyric *versus* dramatic, stable *versus* unstable, harsh *versus* gracious, dark *versus* bright.<sup>37</sup>

### The picturesque

Admiration for Mozart’s sense of balance granted, I would still want to dwell on the first of the two strata identified in Mozart’s c minor *phantasia*, the seemingly negative strategy of thwarting expectation through surprise, connecting it to the wider issue here under discussion.

It is indeed a very protracted path from *phantasia* as an epistemological concept to *phantasia* as an artistic entity in 18th to early 19th century musical cultures. Nevertheless, in the exploratory character of the latter, shared by composers as different as Bach and Schubert, I discern a persistent element of the primal cognitive impetus of the word and the concept, *phantasia*. During the latter part of 18th century, that cognitive impetus was epitomized in the aesthetic category of the ‘picturesque’,<sup>38</sup> closely associated in contemporaneous criticism with the ‘free fantasia’.<sup>39</sup> The ‘picturesque’ is not to be confused with the ‘pictorial’, though both terms derive, of course, from the same Latin word, *pictura*, ‘picture’, ‘painting’, ‘image’. Etymology tends to mislead here. While the ‘pictorial’ was, at the time, constituted by the representation of objects, the ‘picturesque’ was understood as a form concerned with abstract qualities such as variety, contrast, and surprise.<sup>40</sup> Pictures can offer examples of picturesqueness, but such static objects may not even provide the clearest manifestations of a temporal process highlighted by theorists of the ‘picturesque’, surprise.<sup>41</sup> To be surprised is to react on a cognitive level through time as it is bound up with the epistemic stance that we call expectation. Expectation is a strong belief that something will happen or be the case because it is likely. Only when an expectation is thwarted<sup>42</sup> can there be surprise.

The master improviser, composer and theorist of the free fantasia, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, called for the skill to take surprising harmonic turns – “frappant zu moduliren”<sup>43</sup>; but they could be surprising only if he knew listeners’ expectations. Whenever a play with listeners’ expectations is performed in the way it is performed in the free fantasia, it directs some of their attention to its peculiar means of doing so: We want to detect what is happening to us. “[T]he effect of the picturesque is curiosity”, said Uvedale Price, a major intellectual advocate of this aesthetic ideal towards the end of the 18th century; “by its variety, its intricacy, its partial concealments, it excites that active curiosity which gives play to the mind”.<sup>44</sup> Activity is the mark of free beings. To the extent that the picturesque fantasia is concerned with any picture at all, it suggests to listeners: ‘Form your own image!’

### Extensions, east- and southwards

At the end, it is worth going back to the beginnings. Classical Greek philosophy had its impact beyond Europe. Aristotle’s concept of *phantasia* is a case in point. It seeped into Arabian<sup>45</sup> poetics which transformed it into the idea and notion of *takhyīl*. This is not to claim that “all aspects of the poetics of *takhyīl* derive from Greek thought”; as Anne Sheppard cautions,

in a very different society from that of classical Greece, with its own distinctive forms of poetry, an originally Greek concept took on a new life and developed in new ways.<sup>46</sup>

Yet whatever the differences, the connection to thought that had been characteristic of Plato’s and Aristotle *phantasia* was maintained in *takhyīl*. Thus Al-Fārābī, in *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, the *Great Book of Music*, introduces imaginative music specifically by way of distinction from music that, having no cognitive merit, is merely a vehicle of amusement. On the one hand, he says, there is the sort of music

that brings pleasure and an audible delight to the soul, and that provides relaxation to the soul without having any other impact on it.

Al-Fārābī, it should be noted, was not opposed to such music; it contributes to an agreeable ambience, he believed, when it is time to relax. But there is more than that to art. For, on the other hand, Al-Fārābī continues, there is imaginative music which

additionally provides the soul with imaginings (*takhayyulāt*), deposits within the soul visualisations (*taṣawwurāt*) of things and inscribes the soul with matters it imitates. The effect of these melodies is comparable to that of adornments and images perceptible to the eye: for there are some which offer

merely a delightful view, and there are others which, in addition to that, imitate the dispositions of things, their emotions, their actions, their morals, their characters [...].<sup>47</sup>

The latter, and by analogy imaginative music, have cognitive merit. That is an aspect in which the idea of imaginative music in Al-Fārābī and in the European tradition coincide; but there is another aspect in which their ways part. Both concur that imaginative music must be more than just agreeable noise. Yet while the European tradition conceived of musical imagination's freedom (that quality transcending pleasure) as independence from text, handing over the genre of fantasy almost entirely to instrumental music, Al-Fārābī conceived of imaginative music as being tied to text, which would make it surpass a relaxing effect on body and mind. Words proffer ideas. Music could only attain the quality of *takhyīl*, Al-Fārābī claimed,

where poetic utterances and certain kinds of oratory are employed, and its uses depend on those of the poetic statements.<sup>48</sup>

However, these remarks of a great theorist should not be mistaken for the practice of Arabian music through the centuries. Even at the time of Al-Fārābī, his remarks were partly strategic, aiming at a "defence of music against attacks from dogmatic religious circles of his day"<sup>49</sup>. There have been, at least in later periods and up to the present, forms of imaginative instrumental music, of musical *takhyīl* not derived from or based on text, in the Near and Middle East. Even under the spell of an Orientalist fantasy, Europeans are well aware of it: Under the name of an *arabesque* in music they would understand an instrumental piece with a highly ornamented melody – something approaching a fantasia. As for Türkiye, the art music genre of the *fantezi* comes to mind.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the focus on an individual instrumental performer in music that highlights phantasia may have been more pronounced in Europe than in Asia. An important example would be *khyāl*,<sup>51</sup> that improvisatory vocal genre performed by multiple groups (*gharanas*) of musicians in North India.<sup>52</sup>

All this, of course, is a far cry from Plato's and Aristotle's *phantasia*. The long-winded transformation from (and of) epistemology into music has left just a faint trace of the former – but a faint trace that has endured over two-thousand years and spread over continents is still something.

University of the Arts, Graz, Austria

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on a paper presented on 8 July 2022 at King's College London. I am grateful to Martin Stokes for comments.

<sup>2</sup> Accounts of the issue that ignore that story, pondering instead a host of supposedly timeless isms, do so at their own detriment. An example is Saam Trivedi, *Imagination, Music, and the Emotions: A Philosophical Study*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 152c. The distinction between 'to appear' (*phainesthai*) and 'to seem' (*dokein*) is both important and contested in Plato.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Sophist* 428a; cf. *Timaeus* 52a.

<sup>5</sup> Allan Silverman, 'Plato on *Phantasia*', *Classical Antiquity* 10 (1991), no. 1, pp. 123–147.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 191c–196b.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic* 598b. Cf., for a succinct discussion, Alessandro Stavru, '*Phainesthai* and *Alētheia* in Plato's *Republic*', *eudia* 11 (2017), pp. 1–7. On *mimēsis* see Mitchell Miller, 'Platonic Mimesis', in *Contextualising Classics*, ed. Thomas M. Falkner, Nancy Felson and David Konstan, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD/Oxford 1999, pp. 253–266.

- <sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *De anima* 431a16: *oudepote noei aneu phantasmatos hē psychē*; see also *De anima* 421a8–17, 432a4–12; and cf. further *De anima* 433a9, 433a20, 433a27, 433b29 as well as *Nicomachean Ethics* 1150b28. In *De anima* 428a24–b9, Aristotle criticizes Plato's account of *phantasia* in the *Sophist*. As it is not decisive for the purpose of the present article, this critique will not be examined here. On *Phantasia in Aristotle's Ethics*, see the collection with this title, ed. Jakob Leth Fink, Bloomsbury, London/New York, NY 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> Aristotle considers an etymology of *phantasia* from *phaos*, “light” (*De anima* 429a), which would specifically link it with the visual sense.
- <sup>10</sup> On the intermediary role of *phantasia*, cf. Kevin White, ‘The Meaning of *Phantasia* in Aristotle's *De Anima*, III.3–8’, *Canadian Philosophical Review* 24 (1985), no. 3, pp. 483–505.
- <sup>11</sup> On the unfolding of the idea see Henry J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity, Interpretations of the De anima*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1996, pt. II, ch. 10.
- <sup>12</sup> The remarks Plato and Aristotle devote to *phantasia* do express that preference, but that's another matter.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Peter Flury, ‘*Phantasia* und *imaginatio* im Bereich des antiken Lateins’, in *Phantasia – Imaginatio. V° Colloquio Internazionale, Roma, 9–11 gennaio 1986*, ed. Marta Fattori and Massimo Bianchi, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Rome 1988 (Lessico Internazionale Europeo 46), pp. 69–79.
- <sup>14</sup> For the history of philosophical terminology, the *locus classicus* on translation *versus* transliteration is Cicero, *Academica* 1.7.25. See also *De optimo genere oratorum* 7.23; *De finibus* 3.1.3–2.5.
- <sup>15</sup> They have often been treated as synonyms; a modern example is Pierre Gassendi, *Syntagma philosophicum* [1658], pt. 2, *Opera omnia*, 6 vols., ed. Henri Louis Habert de Montmor, introd. Tullio Gregory, Frommann Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt 1964, vol. 2, p. 440: “a *phantasia*, seu *imaginatrice* vi”. For a contemporary attempt at distinction, cf. Roger Scruton, ‘Fantasy, Imagination and the Salesman’, in his *Modern Culture*, Continuum, London/New York, NY 2007, pp. 55–67. Scruton takes up Coleridge's distinction between “fancy” and “imagination”, in his *Biographia Literaria* [1817].
- <sup>16</sup> Augustine, *De trinitate* 8.6.9, cf. 9.6.10 and 11.5.8; *De musica* 6.11.32.
- <sup>17</sup> I omit discussion of Gerard Watson's wide-ranging thesis that the notion of *phantasia*, which in Graeco-Roman culture up to the first century BC had been confined to epistemology, was after that extended to include “the notion of the creation of an unreal and even ideal world, visualized by the artists and shared with others for their pleasure and enlightenment, the world of imagination” (Gerard Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, Galway University Press, Galway 1988, p. 59). Watson discusses Cicero, Seneca, Quintilian, Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius*), and Pseudo-Longinus (ch. 4), as well as Augustine (ch. 6).
- <sup>18</sup> Guy de Saint Denis [Guy of Saint-Denis], *Tractatus de tonis* [c. 1300], ed. and trans. Constant J. Mews, Carol J. Williams, John N. Crossley, and Catherine Jeffreys, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 2017.
- <sup>19</sup> Johannes de Grocheio, *Ars musice* [c. 1300], ed. and trans. Constant J. Mews, Carol J. Williams, John N. Crossley, Leigh McKinnon, and Catherine Jeffreys, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 2011.
- <sup>20</sup> – in the sense of upsetting the foundations, not in the sense of historical influence; cf. Christian Mayer and Karen Desmond, *The Ars musica attributed to Magister Lambertus*, Ashgate, Farnham/Burlington, VT 2015, pp. xxxi–xxxiii.
- <sup>21</sup> Tomás de Santa María, *Libro llamado Arte de tañer fantasía, assi para tecla como para vihuela, y todo instrume[n]to, en que pudiere tañer a tres, y a quatro voces*, Francisco Fernández de Cordova, Valladolid 1565.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Hikmet Unlu, ‘*Dynamis* and *Energeia* in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022), no. 1, pp. 17–31.
- <sup>23</sup> Thomas Morley, *A plaine and easie introduction to practicall musicke*, Short, London 1597, p. 193.
- <sup>24</sup> On *stylus phantasticus*, cf. Paul Collins, *The Stylus Phantasticus and Free Keyboard Music of the North German Baroque*, Routledge, London/New York, NY 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> Kircher included Froberger's *Hexachord Fantasia* in his *Musurgia universalis*, with a hint to the student of its value as a model.
- <sup>26</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia universalis*, Reprint of the edition Rome 1650, ed. Ulf Scharlau, Olms, Hildesheim 1970, p. 585.
- <sup>27</sup> To explore the notion of play in this context would go beyond the scope of this article. Much is to be learnt from Gregory Bateson, ‘A Theory of Play as Fantasy’, in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Aronson, Northvale, NJ 1982, pp. 454–471.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. Eugenio Garin, ‘*Phantasia* e *imaginatio* fra Marsilio Ficino e Pietro Pomponazzi’, in *Phantasia – Imaginatio. V° Colloquio Internazionale, Roma, 9–11 gennaio 1986*, ed. Marta Fattori and Massimo Bianchi, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Rome 1988 (Lessico Internazionale Europeo 46), pp. 3–20.



- <sup>29</sup> While that career was unique, it was not at all discontinuous with the previous century; e.g., J.S. Bach held Froberger's work in high esteem. See Jacob Adlung, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit* [1758], Bärenreiter, Kassel 1953 (Documenta musicologica I/4), p. 711.
- <sup>30</sup> Its versatility is set out well in Matthew Head, 'Fantasia and Sensibility', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka, Oxford University Press, New York, NY 2014, pp. 259–278. In spite of the volume in which Head's chapter appears, fantasia is not a topic either, as the author realizes.
- <sup>31</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister: Das ist Gründliche Anzeige aller derjenigen Sachen, die einer wissen, können, und vollkommen inne haben muß, der einer Capelle mit Ehren und Nutzen vorstehen will*, Herold, Hamburg 1739, pt. II, ch. 13, § 132. Cf. Roland Kanz, *Die Kunst des Capriccio. Kreativer Eigensinn in Renaissance und Barock*, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Munich/Berlin 2002 (Kunstwissenschaftliche Studien 103), p. 54. In his discussion of *stylus phantasticus* (*Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* § 93), Mattheson directly borrows from Athanasius Kircher.
- <sup>32</sup> "Caprice" for "Grillen" may be disputable, as there is, at the time (*vide* Johann Sebastian Bach, *vide* Haydn), alongside the *fantasia*, also the *capriccio*. Cf. Gretchen A. Wheelock, 'Mozart's Fantasy, Haydn's Caprice: What's in a Name?', in *The Century of Bach and Mozart: Perspectives on Historiography, Composition, Theory and Performance*, ed. Sean Gallagher and Thomas Forrest, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2008, pp. 317–341.
- <sup>33</sup> Mattheson probably knew the piece; though not printed at the time, it circulated in a number of handwritten copies in Northern Germany.
- <sup>34</sup> *Phantasia* is the title that Mozart used in the autograph; the volume of *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*, published in 1986, shortly before the rediscovery of the autograph (1990), has *Fantasie in c*. Cf. Eugene K. Wolf, 'The Rediscovered Autograph of Mozart's Fantasy and Sonata in C Minor, K 475/457', *The Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992), no. 1, pp. 3–47, pp. 12–13, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 'Fantasie in c', in *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, vol. IX/25, ed. Wolfgang Plath and Wolfgang Rehm, Bärenreiter, Kassel/Basel/London 1986, pp. 70–79. In the *Verzeichniß* of his own works, Mozart wrote: "Eine Phantasie für das Klavier allein".
- <sup>35</sup> *I.e.*, they are not separated by breaks.
- <sup>36</sup> Eugene K. Wolf, 'The Rediscovered Autograph of Mozart's Fantasy and Sonata in C Minor, K 475/457', *The Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992), no. 1, pp. 3–47, p. 27.
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. Thomas Irvine, 'Mozarts KV 475: Fantasie als Utopie', *Acta Mozartiana* 50 (2003), pp. 37–49.
- <sup>38</sup> Cf. Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1991.
- <sup>39</sup> Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, *passim*. Still indispensable as regards the 'free fantasia': Peter Schleuning, *Die freie Fantasie. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der klassischen Klaviermusik*, Kümmerle, Göppingen 1973 (Göppinger akademische Beiträge 1976).
- <sup>40</sup> Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 5.
- <sup>41</sup> Cf. Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful*, New Edition, Robson, London 1796, p. 55: "The English word [*viz.*, picturesque] naturally draws the mind towards pictures; and from that partial and confined view of the subject, what is, in truth, only an illustration of picturesqueness, becomes the foundation of it."
- <sup>42</sup> What happens may fall behind the expectation or surpass it; there is the ugly surprise and the marvellous one.
- <sup>43</sup> *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, pt. II, 2nd ed., Schwickert, Leipzig 1797, ch. 41, new § 12.
- <sup>44</sup> Cf. Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful*, New Edition, Robson, London 1796, pp. 105–106.
- <sup>45</sup> In my use of words, "Arab" refers to the people, "Arabic" to their language, and "Arabian" to the geographic location of Arabia and things that come from it.
- <sup>46</sup> Anne Sheppard, 'Preface', in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*, ed. Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond, Gibb Memorial Trust/Short Run Press, Exeter 2009, pt. I, pp. ix–vx, p. ix.
- <sup>47</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr* [The Great Book of Music] [c. 950], excerpt in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*, ed. Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond, Gibb Memorial Trust/Short Run Press, Exeter 2009, pt. I, p. 19.
- <sup>48</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr* [The Great Book of Music] [c. 950], excerpt in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*, ed. Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond, Gibb Memorial Trust/Short Run Press, Exeter 2009, pt. I, p. 20.

- <sup>49</sup> Yaron Klein, 'Imagination and Music: *Takhyīl* and the production of music in al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr*', in *Takhyīl: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*, ed. Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond, Gibb Memorial Trust/Short Run Press, Exeter 2009, pt. II, pp. 179–195, p. 180: "By positing music as a medium for conveying the meanings that the imaginative faculty produces, and by making melodic meanings heavily contingent upon poetical utterances, al-Fārābī establishes a respectable place for music as a serious science and a serious practice". Cf. pp. 189, 195.
- <sup>50</sup> Cf. Martin Stokes, '*Fantezi/Fantasy and Usûl*', in *Rhythmic Cycles and Structures in the Art Music of the Middle East*, ed. Zeynep Helvacı, Jacob Olley and Ralf Martin Jäger, Ergon, Würzburg 2017 (Istanbul Texts and Studies 36), pp. 279–288.
- <sup>51</sup> The words *takhyīl* and *khyal* are etymologically related.
- <sup>52</sup> Bonnie Wade, *Khyal: Creativity Within North India's Classical Vocal Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, is certainly not the last word on this fantastic music; but the book has – deservedly, I think – become a kind of ethnomusicological classic.

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# Concept of Nature in the Musical Aesthetics of the Chinese Guqin

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MEI-YEN LEE

**Abstract:** This study explores the concept of nature in the musical aesthetics of the Chinese guqin (zither) from a material perspective (i.e., through the materials, musical tablatures, melodic phrases, and suitable environments used in playing the guqin), and from a spiritual perspective through an analysis of Kang Hsi's "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither," or "Poetic Essay on the Lute") and Hong Hsu's "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" ("Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music," or "Hsi-Shan's Epithets on Qin Music"). Guqin aesthetics developed under the influence of the Taoist theory regarding cultivation reflecting the highest level of unity among humans, nature, and the universe. The concept of nature is at the core of guqin music, and harmonious unity with nature is the main pursuit of guqin players.

**Keywords:** Guqin, musical aesthetics, nature, "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither" or "Poetic Essay on the Lute"), Kang Hsi, "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" ("Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music" or "Hsi-Shan's Epithets on Qin Music"), Hong Hsu

## 1. Introduction

Identifying a means of achieving coexistence between humans and nature has been a common focus of Eastern and Western thinkers throughout history. In Chinese philosophy, this focus falls within understanding how to reconcile humans and nature, that is, understanding how humans and nature are related. Hundreds of schools of thought on this topic have developed since the pre-Ch'in period (before 221 BCE). Although scholars have reported varying opinions, the unity of humans and nature has consistently been a core aspect of Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, the relationship between humans and nature is not oppositional. Rather, it is integrated and harmonious. Ancient Chinese people did not consider nature to be an object outside of human life that should be praised or revered; they contemplated a means of peacefully coexisting with nature.

Chinese music developed through traditional Chinese culture, which has a focus on establishing a harmonious connection between humans and nature. This aspect of traditional Chinese culture is reflected in the aesthetics of Chinese music and is particularly notable in Chinese guqin music. The guqin is a key artifact of Chinese material culture. Concepts related to learning from nature appear in multiple aspects of guqin music.

## 2. Relationship between guqin music and nature from the perspective of material culture

The guqin is a crucial artifact of Chinese music. Therefore, it is valuable both for the music it creates and its cultural significance. Traditional Chinese literature and historical documents frequently discuss the associations among the guqin, heaven and earth, and the universe and nature. This is reflected in the guqin-related historical documents, musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts, melodic phrases, and the environments in which the guqin is traditionally played.

### 2.1. The material used to make the guqin

To ancient Chinese people, the guqin was a musical instrument with noble significance. The materials used to make a guqin can affect the tone of the instrument; trees, which are the source of the wood used to make the guqin, grow upward into the air, which ancient Chinese people believed was the essence of the universe. In “Rhapsody on the Zither,”<sup>1</sup> Kang Hsi of the Wei and Jin dynasties wrote

The place where the paulownia grows,  
Rests on a high ridge of a lofty mountain.  
Pushing its roots through the layered earth, tall it rises;  
Reaching to the Northern Dipper, it soars on high.  
Enveloped in the pure harmony of Heaven and Earth,  
It inhales the auspicious radiance of sun and moon.  
Lush and thick, it stands in unique luxuriance

(Knechtges 281)

Hsi indicates that a guqin should be made of paulownia wood obtained from a sacred place that has been nurtured by the heaven, the earth, the sun, and the moon.

### 2.2. Guqin musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts

The earliest known ancestral guqin music tablature is a textual notation of the “You Lan” (Orchid) that was completed by Ming Chu, who lived in the Liang State during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Figure 1). In the Tang Dynasty, Rou Cao (730-?), a well-known guqin player at the time, reduced the number of strokes in Chinese characters and invented abbreviated character notations. The descriptions of the abbreviated character notations include the *hui*,<sup>2</sup> number of strings, and fingerings, which formed the guqin music tablature with notations comprising combined words. Textual notations in guqin music tablature were replaced by abbreviated character notations. (Figure 2).

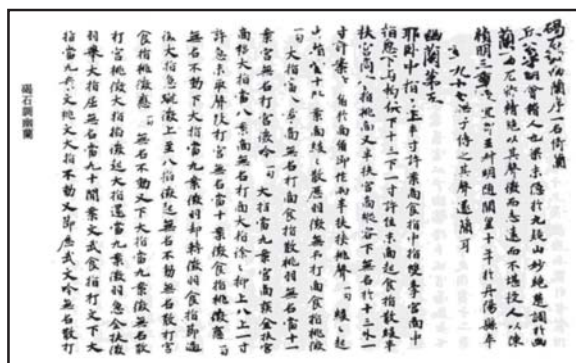


Fig. 1: Textual notation of the “You Lan” (Orchid) [Chu 3]



Fig. 2: Abbreviated character notation

Guqin fingering notations have symbols that differ from those of Western five-line staff notation. Guqin notations do not indicate pitch and rhythm, which provides players with considerable flexibility. In addition, the fingering and gesture charts use both images and text to indicate how each finger should move. The player can conceptualize the timbre effects that the fingering action is intended to produce.

Examples of ancient Chinese fingering and gesture charts are presented in Figure 3-1 and 3-2. The charts present a textual interpretation of finger movements combined with images of fingers clearly demonstrating the gestures required to play the guqin. Guqin notation charts metaphorically represent the characteristics of the target timbre by using images drawn from many sources, including landscapes, animals, plants, and mythology. Because of this, the fingering and gesture charts of



guqin notation convey the cultural importance and aesthetics of guqin music in addition to target fingerings and sound characteristics; the aural aesthetics of guqin music are integrated with nature, the universe, and life.

When a player examines the fingering and gesture charts, he can understand ancient Chinese people's aesthetic interpretation of guqin music and teach this to others. This can help modern people appreciate the liveliness and emotions conveyed through guqin music. These charts both convey ancient Chinese aesthetic perceptions of guqin music and present sounds through imagery and visual associations, which preserves the purpose of guqin music as a means of communication between humans and nature.

The first known guqin music handbook with complete fingering and gesture charts was published in *Xin Kan Tai Yin Da Quan Ji*, which was a complete volume in which the author compiled ancient guqin music tablature and theory, during the Zhengde years (1506–1521) of the Ming Dynasty (Yuan 63–64). The fingering and gesture charts of *Xin Kan Tai Yin Da Quan Ji* (Figure 3-1 and 3-2) have the following characteristics:

- All charts use the same form of instruction, including *jian zi pu* (i.e., abbreviated character tablature) and indications of a target gesture, playing technique, and metaphorical representation of a sound.
- The charts contain illustrations representing the heavens and earth. These include illustrations of natural landscapes, animals, plants, and images associated with traditional legends.
- In ancient China, the imagery of sound was expressed with *xing*, which is a term connected with considerable imagination and association, to inspire guqin players to conceptualize the sound as having color and quality.



Fig. 3-1



Fig. 3-2

### 2.3. Collections of guqin music

According to Fu-Hsi Zha's *Cun Jian Gu Qin Qu Pu Ji Lan* (*Overview of Preserved Guqin Tablatures*), which is a collection of writings on guqin music,<sup>3</sup> pieces featuring the theme of nature are ubiquitous in this extensive collection of guqin music. The images include springs flowing over stones, white snow, running water, mountains, plum blossoms, springs in green gullies, wild geese on sandbanks, and clouds over the Xiao and Xiang rivers. Other guqin pieces, such as spring morning chants and

autumn wind lyrical pieces have seasonal themes. Guqin pieces with nature-related themes reflect ancient Chinese people's emotional and practical reliance on nature and the harmony between humans and nature.

#### *2.4. Environments in which the guqin was traditionally played*

In ancient China, environments were expected to meet several requirements to be considered suitable for playing the guqin. Several documents written during the Ming and Qing dynasties discuss the requirements for a venue to be considered suitable for playing the guqin. One such document is *Tan Qin Za Shuo* (*Miscellaneous Comments on Playing Guqin*), which was written by Biao-Zeng Yang during the Ming Dynasty in approximately 1520–1590. He defines a suitable environment for playing the guqin as a clean hall or a high-rise pavilion when the instrument is played indoors and a wooded mountain, mountain peak, water bank, or a Taoist abbey when the instrument is played outdoors. He indicates that the guqin player should be quietly seated in harmony with *yin* and *yang* and accompanied by the moon and a breeze. He also indicates that although having an appreciative listener can be gratifying, the moon, breeze, pines, rocks, apes, and old cranes can serve as an audience (270).

DeWoskin noted a connection between guqin music and nature, stating, "The guqin's aesthetic language is the language of nature" (24).<sup>4</sup> Pearce noted that the frequent inclusion of the guqin in Chinese landscape paintings represents the relationship between humans and nature and that the order of music is similar to the order of nature (42).

### **3. Relationship between guqin music and nature: Spiritual cultivation**

The connection between guqin music and nature is deeply spiritual; guqin music offers emotional sustenance.

#### *(1) Taking in the beauty of nature*

Ancient documents discussing Chinese aesthetics contain numerous writings discussing the aesthetic ideals of the guqin. Two of these writings are particularly notable: the "Qin Fu" written by Kang Hsi during the Wei and Jin dynasties and the "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" written by Hong Hsu during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Both of these writings discuss the relationship between playing the guqin and nature.

Hsi's "Qin Fu" indicates that natural landscapes were frequently used to describe aesthetic concepts in music, as demonstrated in the following phrases:

And now can the proper music be played,  
And sublime melodies be performed...  
Their manner is like lofty mountains,  
And also resembles rolling waves:  
Now full and flowing,  
Then tall and stately (Knechtges 289)...  
Sometimes through a difficult passage the notes follow the beat,  
Then, awaiting an opening, they go to a more perilous height:  
Screeching like a stray jungle fowl crying by a limpid pond,  
Winging like a wandering swan soaring over steep cliffs.  
The tones, diversely hued, brightly colored,  
Hang thickly like drooping fringe.  
The echoing sounds carried by a gentle breeze,  
Dainty and delicate, linger in the air (Knechtges 295).  
Fluttering about, distant and far,  
Faint tones swiftly depart.  
Heard from afar,

They are like the harmonious singing of simurgh and phoenix playing amidst the clouds.  
 Examined more closely,  
 They are like a cluster of spreading blossoms glistening in a spring breeze (Knechtges 295).

Hsi's "Qin Fu" describes the sound of the guqin as being capable of prompting people to imagine landscapes, such as mountains and bodies of water, or crows, flying geese, the song of a phoenix, and hundreds of flowers in full bloom. Hsi transcribes his perception of the beauty of guqin music into a description of a natural scene. He demonstrates how a reciprocal relationship emerges between guqin music and humans, with the musical images the guqin produces in the mind being associated with nature. To reinforce this, Hsi cites Zhuang Zi's concept of the "Perfected Man" to describe the ideal setting for the cultivation of the virtue of guqin.

The final stanza says:

Quiet and gentle is the zither's virtue—  
 It cannot be fathomed.  
 Its purity of essence, detachment of purpose  
 Are truly hard to attain.  
 Instruments of good quality and fine players  
 Can be found in this age.  
 Its rich and harmonious sound  
 Surpasses all other arts  
 But those who understand its music are few,  
 And who can truly treasure it?  
 For fully comprehending the elegant zither,  
 There is only the Perfected Man (Knechtges 303).

According to Addiss, Kang Hsi argues "the qin has the greatest virtue, and goes on to write a powerfully poetic description of nature" (27). Addiss supports this claim by citing how "Qin Fu" ("Rhapsody on the Zither") discusses "the virtue of guqin" from nature-based perspectives and includes pieces of guqin music, such as "Towering Mountains" and "Flowing Water" that were inspired by nature. Addiss also reports that the guqin should be played outside, under the moon, and that the fingering gestures in guqin tablatures are related to nature (Addiss 30–32). Guqin players who wish their music to represent that of "the elegant zither" should be clear headed and live a clean life. Players should protect their minds from the bustle of the material world. Hsi referenced Zhuang's "Perfected Man," stating, "For fully comprehending the elegant zither, there is only the Perfected Man" (Knechtges 303). This demonstrates that Hsi considers the virtue of guqin to be closely associated with physical and mental cultivation and playing the guqin to be capable of revealing a path to self-cultivation. When this occurs, the guqin player's spirit merges with that of nature. As indicated by Kouwenhoven, "Qin players strive to transcend the limitations of human experience by seeking spiritual communication with nature," and "The qin serves as a bridge to the non-human world, a presumed realm of immortality, eternal peace and transcendental fulfilment" (42).

In addition to "Qin Fu," "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" by Hong Hsu is a core text in the history of Chinese guqin musical aesthetics. It was completed in the 14th year of the Chongzhen Emperor's reign during the Ming Dynasty (1641) and was included in the *Da Huan Ge Guqin Tablatures* (*Qing Shan Guqin Tablatures*), which was published in the 12th year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign during the Qing Dynasty (1673). The theory presented in "Xi Shan Qin Kuang" divides guqin aesthetics into 24 categories: *He* (harmony), *Jing* (quietude), *Qing* (clarity), *Yuan* (distance), *Gu* (antiquity), *Dan* (unadornedness), *Tian* (tranquility), *Yi* (transcendence), *Ya* (elegance), *Li* (beauty), *Liang* (brightness), *Cai* (luster), *Jie* (cleanliness), *Run* (moisture), *Yuan* (roundness), *Jian* (firmness), *Hong* (grandness), *Xi* (fineness), *Liu* (smoothness), *Jian* (vigor), *Qing* (lightness), *Zhong* (heaviness), *Chi* (slowness), and *Su* (rapidity)<sup>5</sup>. Using these 24 aesthetic categories, Hsu developed a set of performance aesthetics and the concepts of artistic aesthetics. Hsu differed from his predecessors in the field of guqin aesthetics

in that he used 24 characters to describe the beauty of guqin music, with each character encompassing an extensive aesthetic concept. He used individual characters to serve as a symbolic representation of complex concepts, which raised the artistic features of guqin music to a complex theoretical level.

In “Xi Shan Qin Kuang,” Hsu identified 24 characters that could be used to discuss the musical aesthetics of the fingers, strings, sound, and meaning related to guqin music and the amount of focus applied for each. Hsu lists *Hong* (grandness) and *Xi* (fineness), *Liu* (smoothness) and *Jian* (vigor), *Qing* (lightness) and *Zhong* (heaviness), and *Chi* (slowness) and *Su* (rapidity) as four pairs of oppositional qualities. These 24 categories cannot be strictly delineated and are not exclusionary. The categories often blend into each other and are not connected through any notable hierarchy.

Other analyses of Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” have had the following focuses:

- a) An investigation of Hsu’s life and age at the time of his writing “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Xiao);
- b) A comprehensive discussion of the musical aesthetics and artistic concepts of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Wu);
- c) A discussion of the 24 characters presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Lee);
- d) An application of the theory presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” to musical theory, including performance psychology, performance aesthetics, and musical emotional expression (e.g., Liu);
- e) An application of the theory presented in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” to the playing and aesthetics of other musical instruments, such as the erhu, pipa, dulcimer, guzheng, piano, and violin (e.g., Song and Xiang);
- f) The relationship between “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” and Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (e.g., Lee);
- g) A comparison of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” with “Shi Pin” and “Sixteen Rules for the Tones of Qin” (e.g., Kung);
- h) An English translation of “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Wang and Peng);
- i) A review of the literature on “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” (e.g., Xiang; Yuan);
- j) Other focuses, including the relationship between “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” and regional aesthetic culture (e.g., Tian).

Few studies have reported on Hsu’s use of single characters to represent and define the aesthetics of guqin music. According to Hsu, when playing the guqin, which is of particular value because the techniques applied for playing the guqin consistently change and the music itself comprises numerous components. A player should seek to imbue the music they create with these qualities. These 24 qualities demonstrate the connection Hsu perceives guqin music to have with nature. Hsu describes the aesthetic sound of the guqin through the symbolism of natural landscapes, which can enable players to recognize the connection between humans and nature, and the boundlessness of the human spirit.

Nature is symbolically incorporated into Hsu’s language, with *He* (harmony) discussed using the imagery of spring landscapes, *Qing* (clarity) and *Chi* (slowness) discussed using the imagery of autumn landscapes, and *Gu* (antiquity) discussed using the imagery of winter landscapes. Hsu’s language indicates that he has a preference for autumn imagery. For example, he describes *Qing* (clarity) as “limpid as an autumn lake, clear as the cool moonlight, rousing as the roars of mountain torrents, deep and remote as echoes in a valley” (Tse 74) and *Chi* (slowness) through the following statement, “As you further explore the wonders of slowness, you will find yourself as if situated on a quiet mountain listening to the sound of autumn. You will see the moon lighting up the forest and a cool spring flowing between rocks” (Tse 93). Although autumn imagery is employed in the descriptions of both of these categories, the meaning is symbolic and carries the deeper significance of tranquility of the mind.

Hsu’s descriptions of *Qing* and *Chi* respectively include the imagery of “clear as the cool moonlight” and “the moon lighting up the forest.” The autumn moon shining high and away serves as a symbolic representation of the boundless capacity of the soul. The descriptions of *Qing* and *Chi* differ in that of *Qing* employs the imagery of the clear beauty of echoes in an empty space (“rousing

as the roars of mountain torrents, deep and remote as echoes in a valley”), whereas that of *Chi* emphasizes the beauty of intermittent fast and slow tempos (“[the] breeze blowing through the pine trees” and “a cool spring flowing between rocks”). Both descriptions involve the player’s soul converging with nature to form a unified whole and indicate that an individual can only achieve a sense of peace by playing the guqin and leaving the secular world behind to thereby discover the boundlessness of nature. By doing so, the player can experience *Qing* and *Chi* (slow) and create sufficient peace and space for their soul to become all encompassing.

Neither Hsi nor Hsu attempted to establish a relationship between the mind and music or to explore the means through which the mind connects musical imagery with nature. Instead, they employed natural scenes as symbols to represent inner feelings. They also did not represent the mind as a mirror that simply reflects or imitates musical expression. When Hsi and Hsu employed symbolic natural imagery, the imagery was used to represent the feelings of the guqin player. Such literary descriptions of the guqin can illustrate the indescribable beauty of the sound of the guqin. When guqin players experience the feelings represented by the natural imagery, the experiences have a deep psychological influence. The sound of the guqin often evoke deep introspection, which enables appreciation of the beauty of guqin music.

As Hsu states, “Those who achieve beyond strings can reflect in their music the grandness of mountains and the vastness of water. One may feel snow falling even in the hot summer, and spring’s warm breeze despite the cold winter. The possibilities are infinite and beyond imagination” (Tse 70–71). The incredible beauty of guqin music beyond the music itself is the process through which the guqin player retreats within themselves to achieve harmony with nature.

## (2) *Accepting silence as beauty*

In addition to using natural landscapes to represent the aesthetics of guqin sound, Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” integrates the Taoist spiritual ideals of *Wu Wei* (noninterference) and *You Wei* (interference) into the aesthetics of guqin music. For example, Hsu incorporates Taoist cultivation theory into his descriptions of the *Dan* (unadornedness), *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) categories:

Yet, a cultivated person is peaceful and without worldly desires. His heart is not tainted with the dust of the world, and his fingers work leisurely. Discussing the principle of the sparse sound with him is delightful and gratifying. Sparse sound is the extreme of quietude, connected with emptiness and traveling through the void, with the mind communicating with the supreme sages of the past (Tse 72).

The ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void. This may not be easily appreciated if the listener does not have a deep understanding of the music (Tse 74).

Yet, once this is appreciated, it will be unceasing. Therefore I said, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound” (Tse 75).

In ancient times, people thought that the *qin* could nurture one’s character because of its grand and harmonious quality. Therefore, they described the sound of the *qin* as sparse (Tse 93).

These descriptions of *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) reveal that the highest achievement in guqin music is sparse sound, as indicated by the statement, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound,” that is, when you look at the overtone. Hsu reports that feelings are elicited by sparse sound because “the ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void.” This concept was likely inspired by the phrase “loud is its sound, but never a word it said” in *Lao Zi* (Chapter 41).<sup>6</sup>

A key focus of Taoism is identifying a means of freeing oneself from an unnatural mindset and hypocrisy to pursue a free and spiritual life. Guqin music is influenced by Taoism, which serves as the foundation for its aesthetics and performance practices. Hsu integrated Lao Zi’s concept of “loud



is its sound, but never a word it said” into his artistic interpretation of guqin aesthetics and named sparse sound the highest aesthetic achievement in guqin music. Hsu uses *Jing* (quietude), *Yuan* (distance), and *Chi* (slowness) to develop the following descriptions of sparse sound:

a) Sparse sound can only be recognized amid extreme silence. In real environments, extreme silence does not exist; only relative silence that contrasts with activity exists. To achieve extreme silence, “one should cool the hot temper and ease the competitive mood,” (Tse 72), calm the mind, and expel restlessness, regardless of the turbulence of the outside world. When a person becomes indifferent to their own mind and releases the soul without hindrance, they achieve extreme silence.

b) The “sparse sound” is according to Hsu, “There is not much when you look for distance within the sound, but it is there in abundance when you look beyond the sound” (Tse 75). On the guqin 7, 147, and 91 sounds can be produced through the *San*, *An*, and *Fan* techniques, respectively.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the left hand can slide back and forth to change the tone and rhythm. However, when Hsu described sparse sound in “Xi Shan Qin Kuang,” he did not directly offer a detailed description of the music itself. Instead, he described sparse sound through the context of a guqin player becoming one with nature. In his description, the sounds transform into silence, which has ever-changing remote sounds; the meaning of this description is sensed rather than explained in words.

These near-illusory effects cannot be achieved through musical practice. In Western music, a basic requirement for forms of music is a clear indication of pitch and rhythm. However, no indicators of pitch or rhythm are included in the *wen zi pu* (character tablatures) and *jian zi pu* (abbreviated character tablatures) of guqin music. These features are omitted to provide each player with unlimited space for artistic expression; players can expand their musical expression beyond the limits of the guqin musical tablature to discover sounds that echo the human spirit through fluctuating sounds and phrases. However, this can only be achieved when the human mind is extremely quiet and free from mundane pursuits and earthly disturbances.

This practice is reminiscent of the “fasting of the mind” of “Man in the World, Associated with Other Men” in *Zhuangzi*, which can be achieved through the following: “Maintain a perfect unity in every movement of your will; you will not wait for the hearing of your ears about it, but for the hearing of your mind. You will not wait even for the hearing of your mind, but for the hearing of the spirit.”<sup>8</sup> By developing the practice of *Wu* (eliminating obsessions and forgetting oneself) through self-cultivation, people learn to respond to bias of the ear (sensory desire) and heart (conscious desire). In doing so, they free their spirits from preoccupation and learn to ignore worldly distractions, which enables their spirits to wander in nature and the individual to achieve harmony with heaven and earth. Hsu applied Zhuang Zi’s fasting of the mind to the practice of guqin and developed the following philosophy: “When the spirit is free and the flow transformed, the mind will reach a transcendental state, something doubly profound.” (Tse 74)

When people seek to understand the beauty of guqin music, the music first enters the ears. When the music subsequently enters the heart, the mind is cultivated beyond a material level and sublimated to spiritual actualization. This spiritual actualization necessitates a pursuit of the freedom of nature beyond the mundane. The human mind is infinite in scope. Playing the guqin can enable an individual to integrate their heart with heaven and earth. Subsequently, through mutual inclusion and purification, heaven and earth can render the mind flexible and boundless.

c) Although the concept of sparse sound was developed to discuss spiritual cultivation, it is inseparable from the practice of guqin. The *San*, *An*, and *Fan* techniques can be applied to produce various tones on the guqin. Left-hand rhythm (*Yin* and *Nou*)<sup>9</sup> and rhyme (*Zhuo* and *Zhu*)<sup>10</sup> have a decisive influence on the quality of the melodies produced on the instruments. According to Hsu, “The lively delights of musical tones depend partly on vibrato and the wonders of vibrato depend totally on roundness and fullness of the sound” (Tse 85). Effective application of *Yin* and *Nou* is determined by the player’s ability to both train their fingers and relax their body, mind, and spirit. The shoulders,

elbows, and hands must naturally follow the breath and the course of the sounds produced by each string to create “the sound of the *qin*, lasting long and far, even when the spirit ventures into the soundless void” (Tse 82).

Here, the “sound of the *qin*, lasting long and far” is the lingering mood produced through the rhythm (*Yin* and *Nou*) and rhyme (*Zhuo* and *Zhu*) played by the left hand. A person who becomes absorbed in the silence of remote sound achieves a higher level of spiritual actualization. For this reason, Hsu stated, “Wonders of the void are achieved when the spiritual effect lingers on despite the end of the music itself” (Tse 82). That is, when a person becomes absorbed in the music beyond the sound of the strings and cultivates space in their soul, they begin to miss the silence they have developed through the cultivation of the mind. This indicates that the key to embodying sparse sound lies in how a player cultivates their life. Only an enlightened person can appreciate that “the ideal sound is a distant one, and the poetic mood resides in the abstruse void” (Tse 74).

#### 4. Conclusion

The guqin is closely associated with nature. Its wooden texture, melodic phrases, and musical tablatures with fingering and gesture charts were designed to imitate the visuals or movements of animals, plants, or scenery. The environments traditionally considered suitable for playing the guqin, such as the mountains or beside a lake or pond, are mostly outdoors, that is, close to nature. These demonstrations of employing nature as a framework reflect the values of the ancient Chinese people, who pursued harmony with nature.

Hsi’s “Qin Fu” and Hsu’s “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” were written on the basis of Taoist ideals regarding cultivation. These authors argue that playing the guqin can enable the individual to achieve harmony with nature. Hsu particularly described guqin players as seeking the highest level of spiritual actualization. His “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” serves as a representation of the culmination of the Chinese guqin musical aesthetics. It offers an in-depth explanation of the influence of nature in Chinese guqin music.

The key to the cultural significance of guqin music can be identified in spirituality and in the role of nature in its aesthetics. “Xi Shan Qin Kuang” discusses the emotional sustenance humans require to achieve spiritual actualization. The information presented in this text reveals that the ancient Chinese people believed in maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature and reflects the ancient Chinese ideal of communicating with nature through guqin music to merge the body, mind, and soul with nature to form a whole.

Although modern listeners of guqin music may consider this ideal to be “drifting away from real life” (Cai 80), if guqin music were stripped of its inspiration from the beauty of nature, it would lose its uniqueness. Guqin music is capable of bringing peace to people’s minds in a mundane world and of establishing a pure, spiritual realm in which humans and nature exist as a whole.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My translation was completed with reference to Tong Xiao's *Wen Xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature* Volume III, "Rhapsody on the Zither" trans. David R. Knechtges. Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 1996. This work is hereafter cited as "Knechtges."  
Adjustments were made to the Knechtges "Rhapsody on the Zither" translation with reference to the original text.
- <sup>2</sup> The surface of upper board has 13 *huis* that mark where the player should place their fingers to play different notes.
- <sup>3</sup> "as many as 144 kinds of printed books, manuscripts, and transcripts. The materials that have been mastered, after repetitions have been eliminated, total 3,365 different transcribed tablatures, 658 different transcribed repertoires, 1,771 theme explanations and postscripts (general descriptions of the history, performance content, and performance effects of the guqin music), and 336 lyrics." (5)
- <sup>4</sup> DeWoskin cited many pieces of guqin music, including "towering mountains" and "flowing waters," that are related to nature. DeWoskin also reported that guqin music is not simply a form of art because art is artificial and unnatural. Nevertheless, the influence of nature in the descriptions of the fingering gestures and techniques that are used to play the guqin, the environment in which the guqin is played, the mood of the players and the listeners, and the guqin itself is similar to that in other art forms and literature. DeWoskin also noted that most of the names of the playing techniques provided on fingering tablatures are derived from nature. DeWoskin reported that each finger movement for guqin music can evoke a mental association with nature, rendering guqin music inextricably linked to nature. (24)
- <sup>5</sup> My translation was completed with reference to Tse's "The Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music by Xu Shangying" (trans. Chun Yen Tse and Shui Fong Lam), in *Shen Lu Xun You—Xie Junren Guqin Lunwen Yu Qu Pu Ji (Reviewing Melodies and Seeking Tranquility—the Collection of Chun Yan Tse's Guqin Paper and Guqin Musical Compositions)*. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing Group, 2016, 65–96.  
This work is hereafter cited as "Tse."  
Adjustments were made to the Tse's "The Xishan Treatise on the Aesthetics of Qin Music by Xu Shangying", translation with reference to the original text.
- <sup>6</sup> My translation was completed with reference to Er Lee, *Tao De Ching*, trans. James Legge, accessed on April 30, <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing/zh?en=on>.
- <sup>7</sup> *San*, *Fan*, and *An* are three basic playing techniques in guqin music. For *San*, an open string is played only by the right hand. For *An*, the left hand moves left and right on the same string after an open string is played by the right hand. The movement of the left hand produces tonal color. For *Fan*, the fingers of the left hand delicately and lightly touch a point indicated by *hui* (a marker of a pitch position), and several strings are plucked by the right hand.
- <sup>8</sup> My translation was completed with reference to Zhou Zhuang, "Man in the World, Associated with other Men," *Zhuangzi*, trans. James Legge, accessed on April 30, 2022. <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/man-in-the-world-associated-with/zh?en=on>.
- <sup>9</sup> *Yin* and *Nao* are fingering techniques. The player uses a left-hand finger to play delicate vibratos as a right-hand finger plucks the string.
- <sup>10</sup> *Chuo* and *Zhu* are fingering techniques. For *Chuo*, the player uses a finger of the left hand to press a string and glides their finger smoothly toward a right *hui* (a marker of pitch position) as a finger of the right hand plucks the string. For *Zhu*, the player uses a finger of the left hand to press a string and glides their finger smoothly toward a left *hui* as a finger of the right hand plucks the string.

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## Book Reviews

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THE DIALECTICS OF MUSIC: ADORNO, BENJAMIN, AND DELEUZE. By Joseph Weiss. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021. 184 pp.

In *The Dialectics of Music*, Joseph Weiss, a lecturer in the department of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University, USA, offers three excursions on music and meaning in the postmodern present. In a series of loosely connected musings from a “constellation” of philosophical and musical sources—the main subjects being Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze, and genres ranging from blues to experimental—Weiss presents a purposely fractured discourse centered on the heavy topic of “music after Auschwitz” (the title of the third excursion). That the book is more an assemblage of ruminations than a systematic treatise, and that it at times offers more questions than answers, seems appropriate given the “gravitational center, around which the concepts, that is, the moving ‘stars,’ cluster” (viii). This does not always make for easy absorption. It is a meditative book meant to be meditated on; its short length and brief subsections invite both slow reading and rereading.

While the author’s abstract approach is not for everyone, the insights provided are, as a whole, thought-provoking and well worth the effort. Weiss’s book joins a multidisciplinary field of “after Auschwitz” studies, ranging from memory (LaCapra 1998), to theology (Rubinstein 1992), to morality (Haas 2014), to architecture (Rosenfeld 2011), to poetry (Gubar 2006), to interreligious dialogue (Ellis 1994), to life in Israel (Burg 2008), and more. Such studies do not deny that life persists largely unabated: human beings continue to engage in the full range of experience and expression, not always (and perhaps rarely) cognizant of the weight of history. Instead, these works ponder which feelings, beliefs, and activities are *appropriate* in the post-Holocaust world.

Weiss focuses on “advanced music” that genuinely reflects, struggles with, and reconciles the realities of our time: “The objective compulsion of a music that would live up to both the victim’s torment and her corresponding dream—that no one, under any circumstances, shall be subjected to torture again—might, therefore, be described as the task of becoming a dialectical composer” (124). He locates this lofty criterion in just a few composers, most notably Michael Gordon, whose work music critic Alex Ross (1993) describes as “the fury of punk rock, the nervous brilliance of free jazz and the intransigence of classical modernism.”

Mention is also made of composers John Adams and Steve Reich, who show that musicians can “play the pulse, ride the wave of the looping, piano echo, instead of the individuated notes or differentiated ‘points’ of sound” (88)—an act that rescues noise, challenges idyllic soundscapes, and points the way to “real transformation” (15). Somewhat counterintuitively, Weiss argues that by exploring, creating, and embracing electronic and electroacoustic sounds, we can reconnect to “the smallest and the largest, the fractal refrain between the microcosm and macrocosm” (36) and, in so doing, reincorporate the natural world, which the “pure tones” of Western classical music often shield us from. He reminds us: “Every development is a preservation of memory, each interval a resistance to the destruction of experience” (107). Music after Auschwitz—the music of *today*—must therefore wrestle with the duality of suffering and hope, raw and refined, turmoil and resolve, ugliness and beauty.

We cannot, according to Weiss, return in good conscience to some long lost, never experienced, artificial innocence, as we might find in the “lulling” sounds of Brahms’s lullabies, where “Each pluck is a little kiss on the forehead” (5). Rather, the “territorializing” of the lullaby—described by Weiss (after Adorno) as “marking out a terrain via sound, so that the fright of impending departure, of the dark, fairytale night, can be borne in solace” (1)—must be replaced with the sounds of reality, just as



the safety of the cradle invariably gives way to the disfunctions, disorders, and disappointments of *real life*. Weiss opines:

One need only think of the drone hum of highways in the distance or the white flashing of radio tower lights that, uniform like the time signature of late capitalism, tick their silent tock before mountainous horizons....[T]oday, after Auschwitz, this hum, which accompanies every child as they fall asleep on automobile and high-speed rail travel to faraway lands, echoes the horror and unrest of airplane bombardment, not the tender caress and rhythm of horse-drawn carriage, which was, to be sure, the basis of the music from Brahms's era. Will this drone, and this static, electrical surge, be rescued one day as their acoustic similarity to the calm, undulating ocean is finally, in peace, recognized? (9–10).

As denizens of a “universal diaspora” (xiii), where paradise and innocence are forever lost, if they ever existed at all, “advanced music” should, in Weiss's view, take its lead from the sorrow songs of bluesmen and blueswomen, whose unpolished, note-bending aesthetic voices the “hopeless clinging to hope” (55). Our messy age of technology, displacement, and hyper-capitalism—an age that is simultaneously post-genocide, witness to genocide, and always anticipating genocide—finds its musical analog in a dignified dissonance that accepts dialectical tensions between noise and sound, the wanted and the unwanted. As Weiss paraphrases Adorno, “Dissonance is the truth of harmony” (27).

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JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN  
*Academy for Jewish Religion California, USA*

MUSIC AND MENTAL IMAGERY. By Mats B. Küssner, Liila Taruffi, & Georgia A. Floridou (Eds.). UK: Routledge, 2023. 293 pp.

Mental imagery, or the representation of sensory information without a direct external stimulus, is among the universal phenomena associated with music. Not only can we “hear” music without corresponding external sounds, but we can mentally create simple or even complex music in our heads, sometimes in varied timbres and orchestrations. Music can also conjure abstract or concrete images, distinct memories or unfolding narratives, a sense of movement or gestures, and signal other senses, such as smells or tactile textures. *Music and Mental Imagery*, edited by Mats B. Küssner, Liila Taruffi, and Georgia A. Floridou, offers a comprehensive anthology of current research into this ubiquitous occurrence. A project of the Society for Education, Music, and Psychology Research

(Sempre), the book's twenty-four empirical studies, divided into five sections, go a long way in demystifying this phenomenon, while also proposing practical applications and pointing out where more research is still needed.

The five chapters in Part I give an overview of common types of modalities of mental imagery: auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic. Georgia A. Floridou (University of Sheffield) reminds us that a "large part of our everyday sensory experience is auditory" (21). She maps out musical imagery that occurs before, during, and after music: voluntary musical imagery of mental rehearsal, anticipatory imagery while listening to music, and involuntary imagery of "mind-pops" (single occurrences of tunes in one's head) and "earworms" (catchy tunes looping over and over in the mind). Lilla Taruffi (Durham University) and Mats B. Küssner (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) focus on the individualized nature of visual mental imagery (VMI) in different musical contexts, from music therapy to shamanic rituals. Despite recent advances, the authors acknowledge that the underlying mechanisms of these responses remain uncertain: "to unlock the full potential of music-related VMI in clinical and other applied contexts, a deeper understanding of the causal relationship among VMI, music, and emotion is yet to be achieved" (38). Rolf Inge Godøy (University of Oslo) looks at connections between actions and sounds, arguing that a listener's musical imagery is closely linked to their motor system. In this motormimetic view of music perception and imagery, "all sound events" and "all sound features" are found on the "body motion trajectory," such that "there often will be some sense of effort associated with sounds" (49). Jin Hyun Kim (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) presents kinaesthetic musical imagery as a "(quasi-)perceptual conscious experience of dynamic self-movement" arising from "mental representations of musical dynamic properties" (54). Noting that music's dynamic properties can result in a sense of self-movement, Kim cautions against equating kinaesthetic musical imagery with the simulation of motor actions or the "imagination of (imitated) motor action, be it sound-producing and music-shaping or not" (61). Drawing from philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience, Bence Nanay (University of Antwerp and Cambridge University) discusses multimodal mental imagery, or mental imagery arising from a modality that is different from the modality in which the imagery occurs, such as a visual image triggering an auditory mental image. Observing that this response to stimuli is more normal than we might recognize, Nanay describes how a dancer's movements can lead listeners to hear altered time signatures that do not actually occur aurally—and are not perceived when the music is heard separately from the dance.

Part II, also with five chapters, evaluates ways of measuring and analyzing music-related mental imagery. Rebecca W. Gelding, Robina A. Day, and William Forde Thompson, all affiliated with Macquarie University, look at subjective and behavioral measurements of music-inspired mental imagery, such as prevalence, nature, content, quality, vividness, intensity, timing, and duration. They call for more sophisticated neuroscientific methods to ground these subjective measures, noting that "multiple tools such as questionnaires, behavioural studies, and neuroimaging studies is recommended in the exploration of both music-evoked visual imagery and auditory imagery for music" (83). Timothy L. Hubbard (Arizona State University and Grand Canyon University) surveys self-reports of mental imagery in musical contexts, laying out the advantages and disadvantages of verbal self-reporting. Particularly helpful is his observation that questionnaires typically do not account for fleeting visual imagery, the blurring of imagery and non-imagery information, and the tendency of respondents to report their interpretation of visual imagery, rather than the imagery itself. Despite this need for improvement, Hubbard contends that self-reports play a key role in understanding music-related mental imagery. Taking a neuroscientific approach, Amy M. Belfi (Missouri University of Science and Technology) offers guidance in choosing appropriate methods for identifying neural correlates of music-related mental imagery. She details four tools in particular—neuropsychology, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography (EEG), and magnetoencephalography—noting that these "neuroscience approaches are likely of little value to the study of music and mental imagery without accompanying behavioural and/or self-report measures" (109). André Ofner and Sebastian Stober of Otto-von-Guericke University

examine neuroimaging data and machine learning techniques to analyze fMRI and EEG data recorded during music listening. They explain that machine learning algorithms can be used to identify patterns in raw data, make predictions, and reveal information invisible to the naked eye. Cognitive ethnomusicologist George Athanasopoulos reflects on his own research in Japan, Papua New Guinea, and Pakistan, bringing to light ethical and methodological challenges in cross-cultural studies of music-related mental imagery. In order to check biases and bypass Western assumptions, such research must be interdisciplinary, incorporating “concepts, approaches, and methods from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and ethnomusicology” (130).

Part III has seven chapters exploring music-provoked imagery-based states of consciousness. Kelly Jakubowski (Durham University) examines music-stimulated autobiographical memories, which can be more intense than memories evoked by other cues, such as photographs. Jakubowski attributes the vividness of memories stirred by music to “the remarkable frequency and diversity of ways with which people engage with music, and the particular value placed on music in developing and maintaining one’s personal and social identity” (144). Behavioral scientist Mahiko Konishi looks at relationships between music and mind-wandering (also called “daydreaming,” “task-unrelated thought,” and “stimulus-independent thought”), and specifically how music listening influences these episodes and how mind-wandering can take the form of musical imagery. Anthony Gritten (Royal Academy of Music in London) looks at distraction, a phenomenon closely related to mind-wandering. Rather than seeing disruption of the listener’s focus as “failed listening,” Gritten contends that distraction retains and amplifies an essential indeterminacy within the listening context. Ruth Herbert (University of Kent) covers musical daydreaming, which is usually understood to involve an inward memory or imagination and diminishing awareness of external phenomena. However, Herbert writes, “evidence from subjective reports of lived experiences of music demonstrates that sometimes attentional focus may fluctuate, inwards and outwards, or be simultaneously distributed between internal and external phenomena” (174). Mats Küssner and Konstantina Orlandatou (Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg) investigate synaesthesia, a rare condition in which the stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to involuntary experiences in a second sensory pathway. They compare sound-color synaesthesia and music-induced visual mental imagery, looking at how mental imagery—a normal musical response—can be regarded as a weak form of synaesthesia. Thijs Vroegh (Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics) looks at absorption, a trance-like state of consciousness. In such a state, multiple dimensions of consciousness are intertwined, including visual imagery. Vroegh proposes a probabilistic graphical model to “study the network structure of music experience in response to a favourite, self-chosen piece of music” that induces absorption (195). Jörg Fachner (Anglia Ruskin University) explores music-evoked mental imagery during altered states of consciousness, arguing that body posture during ecstatic states downregulates the physical arousal and frees up energy for focusing on the imagery: “Whether the music is monotonous or complex to induce rich imagery depends on the setting, but the reduced amount of body movement seems to be important for free energy” (205).

The six chapters in Part IV propose practical applications of music-evoked mental imagery. Rebecca S. Schaefer (Leiden University) discusses how mental musical imagery can be used in motor rehabilitation for movement-related purposes, such as Parkinson’s disease, as well as in music pedagogy for both expressiveness and memorization. Taking a practical approach, she finds similarities between the processes of mental imagery in movement recovery and music pedagogy, and advocates for protocols and teaching methods in these two contexts. Katherine K. Finch and Jonathan M. Oakman, both of the University of Waterloo, review studies of how voluntary imagery is used by musicians to manage affective-related aspects of performance, particularly in the realm of performance anxiety. For a musician preparing for a specific performance or performance-related goal, they propose a four-part mental preparation: metaphorical imagery, relaxation imagery, systematic desensitization, and imagery in mental skills training. Gestalt psychotherapist Helena Dukic looks at how mental music imagery can take the form of a narrative, or a sequence of meaningful

events involving a setup, confrontation, and resolution. According to Dukic, these impressions follow active and passive exchanges (tension and release) suggested in specific features of music. Pianist Graziana Presicce gives a summary of performers' experiences with visual imagery, offering three categories of visual imagery during music performances: spontaneous, heuristic, and strategic. She argues that these forms of imagery can enhance the expressiveness of a performance (or preparation for a performance). Anri Herbst and Silvia van Zyl, of the University of Cape Town, focus their study on four visually impaired pianists. The authors discuss how the pianists' internal experience, such as the use of metaphors and occurrences of mind-wandering, can compensate for their visual impairment, and shift attention to embodied cognition and dynamic system theories. Singer, lecturer, and conductor Mary T. Black examines how choral conductors use verbalized imagery—metaphors, similes, descriptive imagery, and other figurative language—to bring out or alter singers' vocal responses.

The book's conclusion, presented as Part V, has a single chapter by Tuomas Eerola (Durham University). He ends on an instructive note:

The real-world applications of music and mental imagery already exist. There are applications in music therapy and education that rely on imagery as part of a therapy process...or as a part of rehearsal and performance process...One of the possible ways to feed the basic research and promote the insights from this area is to campaign for featuring this topic more prominently in the teaching of music theory, musicology, and music performance, since these are the areas with the widest reach for people who are likely to be the music professionals in the future (286).

For the reasons Eerola outlines, this book is a valuable anthology of essays that, taken together, advocate for a deeper appreciation and broader applications of music and mental imagery.

JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN

*Academy for Jewish Religion California, USA*

MUSIC IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE: PERSPECTIVES ON A MUSICAL SPECIES. By Jonathan L. Friedmann (Ed.). Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. 345 pp.

This book consists of sixteen individual essays, each an independent argument attempting to move forward the knowledge of various fields, including anthropology, linguistics, neuroscience, history, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and musical philosophy. Yet each chapter builds on the others in terms of a narrative stream, building arguments of the complex relationship of humans to music. The book attempts to answer questions such as “What is the relationship between speech and music, and which came first?,” or “Why do all cultures have music?,” or “What does music symbolize?,” or “What is the different aesthetic experienced by music when performed or heard?,” or “What is the purpose of music in a society?” Each writer investigates an aspect of the evolution of music along with humanity's development and attempts to understand the dynamic that gives meaning to this fact in human existence. Each chapter stands alone and can be read as an example of research in that field in its own right. Each contains significant references to the current literature in its field, along with an extensive bibliography, making them easily considered for use in teaching and learning in a college curriculum. Each chapter advances its field in interesting ways, yet some may be considered as an outlier to current thinking on those topics. Taken as a whole, this book is neither simplistic in approach nor straightforward, but rather complex. The book is not broken into subsections that acknowledge similarities between disciplines, but rather approaches the questions at hand as one of dialogue with each other as well as the current literature. It is intrinsically intersectional in its approach, and therefore to most fully comprehend the arguments, it must be apprehended as a whole — as each chapter contributes a building block in understanding the overall

argument that human musical expression is intrinsic as well as complex, is innate as well as learned, and is characteristic as well as unique.

The book opens with a reprint of an article by Bruno Nettl, addressing the great discoveries of ethnomusicology by pointing out that ethnomusicology has given the Western world a different way of seeing and understanding “music” as actually a world of musics. Music is not, in fact, a “universal” language and it functions differently in different cultures and societies. Ethnomusicology, Nettl argued, demonstrates music is on a continuum from improvisational to composed, that geographic boundaries are not useful, and that no one determinant is operational in musical style. Rather, Nettl argued, ethnomusicologists have recognized the changing nature of musical culture and the domains it occupies in the lives of people. Nettl’s argument, “contradicting and correcting conventional wisdom and accepted knowledge” (11) is that there is no one way of defining music and its roles in society. His essay lays the very foundation of the philosophical premise for the book. Each succeeding chapter attempts to explain at least one aspect of that ever-elusive definition.

Beginning at the very beginning of humanity, John Collins attempts to track down the origins of music to prehistoric hominin and prove that they had forms of vocal-gesturing, and that musical tones were likely an ingredient of their communication or early language. His argument is that this occurred in both small-brained predecessors as well as the later, larger-brained Homo genus. He draws these conclusions with nine pro-music evidence claims, by combining disciplines of linguistics, archaeology, human infant studies, evolutionary theory, primatology, and ethnomusicology. Alejandra Wah’s chapter follows immediately, attempting to understand what underlies the ability to experience music, basing her study on the field of biomusicology, and focusing on the cognitive processes of interoceptive perception during hominin evolution. She argues that the universality of singing, the capacity to synchronize with others in dance, and the fossil record of instruments at least 44,000 years old, all strongly suggest early development of music in human history. She concludes that preverbal and nonverbal stories told through music, song and dance, were a capacity possibly available as early as the hominins.

Victor Grauer also looks backward in time to try to discover additional relationships between music and language. His approach uses genetics to trace back population groups to attempt to show possible early relationships among different musical style families. His graphic “tree” is a provisional model, which offers intriguing possible “historical channels through which these various styles developed” (81) attempting to explain how distinctive affinities of style, such as ballads or strophic solo songs, exist among so many widely dispersed indigenous peoples. Various possible migration theories are presented, along with correlations following tonal languages around the world. Grauer suggests a reexamination of tonal versus non-tonal language origins may be needed. Chapter 5 by Simha Arom, observes traditional musics and examines the idea that musical theory is idiomatic and is understood in various cultures without the users having consciously expressed specific rules. Following further along the lines of whether music is part of language or an art, Piotr Podlipniak, also examines the communication function of music in hopes of redefining music.

In a different direction for understanding the origins of a subset of music, Nino Tsitsihvili, looks beyond current theories of sexual selection for creating love songs, toward a model that suggests that humans living under more cultural constraints may have been compelled to create romantic song as a way of compensation for the lack of sexual freedoms. Tsitsihvili observes that there are more love songs in traditional societies with fewer permitted sexual liberties, and that love songs are scarcer in those societies with more individual freedoms. While sexual taboos are universal in human culture, their degrees vary widely and so too, the human musical responses to them.

Thinking “out of the box,” is clearly part of Joseph Jordania’s world view. He argues that music must be linked to evolutionary theory, and posits the idea that music may be a part of predator avoidance strategies, a known major asset for survival for any person or animal. Jordania suggests that music was part of a defense strategy by humans, and names six major observations to support his theory. For example, traditional societies used music and dance before hunting and fighting, and this



may have been to change the psychological makeup of those undertaking such missions. He also observes that western militaries all employ communal singing and orchestras and that historically such practices were woven into military traditions. He goes on to list homosexuality and cannibalism as other predator avoidance strategies, and suggests further research to find additional human behaviors that may be tied to predator avoidance strategies.

While this book is not broken into subsections, the last half of the book seems to be more about the music itself, and less on theories that intersect with other far-flung disciplines.

Ellen Dissanayake investigates human behaviors that strengthen bonding using ritualized expression, such as between mothers and infants, and the roles of various forms of mourning and laments. She understands mother interactions with infants, such as use of voice, facial expressions, and body movements with their child, as a form of ritualized interaction. Dissanayake defines a lament as “a narrative expression of feeling grief and loss in a ritualized form... whose primary function appears to be externalization or expression of the emotion and at least temporary relief from that emotion.” (164) She sees the lament itself existing in a state between nature and culture, part emotion and part art. She surveyed mourning rituals and laments in various indigenous cultures, providing a detailed chart of the findings, and seeing lament as a form both ancient and adaptive, but one that increases social bonds.

Other indigenous practices, such as animal story songs, serve not only to preserve culture in oral traditions, but also to encode ecological knowledge and practices, observes Michelle Scalise Sugiyama. Animal story songs have long been understood as part of Native American cultures, but further research has determined that the practice is global to hunter-gatherer societies, thus suggesting a far more important survival strategy embedded in this stylistic choice.

Other cultural practices, such as the apotropaic sounds, images and objects of ancient cultures are examined by Jonathan Friedmann. Apotropaic phenomena were intended to be any gesture, sound (including noise, music, or speech), object (including instruments or utensils), or device that could avert evil or turn away bad luck, demons, ghosts, evil spirits, diseases, and so on. Such “magical” qualities were performed or experienced in various practices, such as divinations, conjurations, exorcisms, incantations, ablutions or invocations. Friedmann relies heavily on textual and archaeological evidence. He links ancient healing practices of music to modern ideas of musical therapy.

Michael Naylor explores the difficult topic of reversing ingrained teachings and historical narratives of oppressive or dominant cultures. He posits that interventions can change these historical patterns by repudiating dehumanization and stereotyping, whether religious or political, and fully appreciating and respecting repressed groups.

Following this idea of reexamining world music and not relying on the established western narrative, Elizabeth Phillips and Steven Brown delve more deeply into musical structures, developing a vocal-melodic theory of the origin of musical scales. Vocal music had been traditionally seen as the vehicle for expressing emotions whereas harmony, or “harmonicity” was seen as based on mathematical ratios and science, and the dominant view of scales for hundreds of years. This view claimed that humans “innately prefer harmonic intervals,” but this view is questioned by the authors in observing that most intervals of scales are small and step-like. Harmonicity theory requires accurate and precise pitch, which is something most singing in indigenous and traditional cultures does not achieve. The authors propose an Interval Spacing theory of scale structure that “accounts for the empirical evidence regarding the physiology and cognition of musical scales and that draws from a wide variety of global musical traditions.” (258) The main point is they want to account for human physiology and the musical traditions of various cultures that more fully explain developments in world musics, and thus create a “descriptive theory of musical scales”.

Robert Lopez-Hanshaw takes a step back to do a bird’s-eye view and observe musical change in the context of evolution. To help describe the changes, he attempts to explain the patterns of cultural evolutionary change as a chaotic system. Lopez-Hanshaw understands music as in dialogue to various culture-specific forces and demonstrates that seeing music as a response to those forces explains *why* music changes, rather than focus on how or what changed. Using the language of

evolutionary biology, he looks at various evolutionary traits of music with case studies surveying melody, rhythm, and pitch systems. Recognizing that “no single factor influences musical evolutions equally across all cultures,” (287) he suggests careful studies analyzing mutually-influencing trends to create a more informed model. He proposes using a tool called Agent-Based Modeling (ABM), coming from the field of archaeology, to more fully understand the chaotic systems.

Looking at some of the newer trends in musical creativity through the lens of the Schillinger system, John Morton, a well-known composer, trombonist and arranger, expresses some of his philosophy on the construction of music as opposed to a romantic notion of “inspiration” or “creativity” in composition. The chapter sums up some of the pertinent points of the Schillinger system, touching on melody, harmony, counterpoint, melodic configuration, and scales. The Schillinger system he describes is still taught at the Berklee College today, as it has been since the founding of that institution. He explains that Schillinger dismissed atonal music as a revolt against nature, and that twelve-tone music rarely allows a listener to perceive the structures and internal logic of the composition upon hearing and is thus difficult to interpret.

The book ends with an essay outlining an experiment on the aesthetic experience of the singing voice by Maja Vukadinovic and Agota Vitkay-Kucera. The authors examined whether singers perceived their own voices as sounding better while they were singing or when later listening to recorded performances of themselves. The authors concluded that perception of the singing voice is in a relationship to not only one actually hearing their voice, but also to the psychological state of a person and their understanding of the art. This small study may inspire further research, but for now, they recommend teachers to ask their vocal students to frequently record and listen to their own voices. This can be helpful to them in their perception of their own voice and improving their vocal quality and singing techniques.

This book’s series of essays takes the reader through an incredibly dense set of intellectual movements and forays, completely fulfilling its subtitle of “perspectives on a musical species.” The reader will come away with new understandings of the origins, functions and methods of musical production, and benefit from the abstract overviews of the interaction of music and how it helps to define, create, and underpin humanity in all its development. The book’s perspective is that music is intricately linked to many aspects of human development and has been part and parcel of those developments, influenced both by human biology and human cultures. Ultimately, this book asks the question whether by understanding these intersections and diverse studies we can infer any general principles, and whether that is necessary. One may conclude after reading these essays that a grand narrative may not be particularly useful.

JUDITH S. PINNOLIS

*Berklee College of Music*

*Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Boston*

THE IMAGINATION OF EXPERIENCES: MUSICAL INVENTION, COLLABORATION, AND THE MAKING OF MEANINGS. By Alan Taylor. London & NY: Routledge, 2021. 114 pp.

**I**n the *Imagination of Experiences*, London-based musician, conductor and musicologist Alan Taylor has provided an engaging synthesis of current academic theories of musical imagination. Taylor is also interested in the practical implications of this synthesis: If this model of the imagination is true, how should that inform musicians’ approach to music? How should it inform listeners? That said, this deceptively short volume covers a lot of ground. Each section is a distinct area of study: The trope of the composer as solitary genius; the theory of imagination; a typology of musical collabora-

tion; and the construction of musical meaning in the minds of listeners. Taylor summarizes present thought on each topic, and proposes his own refinements, which flow logically from the current consensus. The crux of the matter is the theory of imagination, and all other topics are ultimately viewed through its lens.

Taylor persuasively shows that musical imagination *necessarily* draws from the lived experience and influences of the composer; that musical ideas come unbidden into the conscious mind, only after an *unconscious* process transforms these experiences and influences; and that this unconscious process takes the abstract form of a *dialogue* between influences, making the ideas thus formed inherently complex and ambiguous (25).

In addition, he cites a distinction between two roles of the imagination: first to *generate* ideas, and then to *evaluate* them (44). This evaluative role of the imagination is particularly intriguing, because the criteria can be unconscious. Composers speak of a “gut feeling” or things “clicking”; in other words, an *embodied* emotional response to their own work, and at times mysterious (to the conscious mind) reasons for being satisfied with it (38).

Taylor draws support for this model of the imagination from theorists on a variety of artistic fields, including dance, visual art, theatre, literature, and poetry, as well as music. He also shows that the model accords well with composers’ written accounts of their own creative process, particularly the oft-repeated trope of an artist feeling that their ideas happen “through” them (2), rather than by their will alone.

The chapters not specifically concerned with this framework are concerned with its implications. Taylor’s first target, and the opening salvo of the book itself, is the notion of the composer as genius (6). In short, because musical imagination by definition cannot exist without influences—it is literally a process of transforming influences—then a composer’s ideas do not originate in their mind alone. This being the case, no composer is worthy of veneration as a solitary creator. This is not a new argument, but it is newly invigorated by the clarity of Taylor’s model of the imagination. Alas, the argument is not now any more likely to catch on, beyond the academics who already overwhelmingly accept it. Particularly among classical musicians, the composer-as-genius idea appears to take on the level of an ideology—and Taylor admits that “belief in an ideology can lead people to resist evidence which contradicts their fixed view” (16).

The section on ideology is brief, and represents a missed opportunity. *Why* do classical musicians cling to the composer as solitary genius? A deeper examination of the psychology of hero worship might have been salubrious here. Despite the acknowledged “dark side” of humans’ fundamental attraction to charismatic leaders (Spector 2015), hero worship—even of fictional heroes—can have positive outcomes as well. These include, for example, imparting wisdom, revealing deep truths, providing a model for emulation, developing emotional intelligence, and providing energy and inspiration to succeed (Allison and Goethals 2015). At the very least, the “ideology” of the genius composer seems rooted in something deeper than mere artistic politics—and this may be more important than the fact that it is wrong.

In any case, Taylor subsequently refines his evidence-based position on composers in the fourth section, by rejecting the validity of the “composer’s intention” in assessing the *meaning* of music (77 ff.). In his conception, composers and performers are classified as types of listeners, and their subjective experiences of music are taken as fundamentally similar to that of other listeners. The process of musical imagination which creates the sensation of meaning is somewhat more complex than that which generates ideas, but it still involves the same mechanism of *embodied cognition* (92). This chapter may be a difficult pill to swallow for a composer—particularly one who suffers from the “illusion” that they are the sole originator of their own ideas (18)! Taylor leans on Derrida and Barthes, at times taking a polemical line on the “death of the composer.” But this should not be misconstrued: Taylor is himself a composer, and an important piece of evidence for him was a separate study he performed, in which his own intentions for the meaning of a piece were compared

to listeners' accounts of the meaning they experienced (86). There was a large discrepancy in specific detail, but broad agreement on the overall tenor of the experience. For Taylor, then, the skill of a composer consists of developing ideas—which anyone may have—into compelling musical *experiences* (79), through the application of a deeply developed craft—which can only be acquired through time and work (8). An experience creates a different sense of meaning in each person's unique imagination; it does not convey denotative information. And so, although composers certainly have the right to assess meaning in their own work, performers and other listeners have an equal right to do so, and cannot be called "wrong" if they disagree with the composer. After all, their experiences of meaning stem from the same imaginative faculty.

Aside from one's personal feelings as a composer, there is some room for dispute on the broadness or absoluteness of Taylor's claims about meaning-making. He admits that in "a few cases" (87) it may be possible for music to communicate more specific meaning as intended by a composer, without naming any. But what of film music? For many people, film scores and soundtracks are their primary exposure to classical music. "The audience must understand... musical conventions" in order to successfully interpret a score during viewing (Green 2010). Indeed, musical conventions can be highly specific ("the youthful brightness of the lydian #4, the alien quality of a tritonal progression"), and there are many such stereotypical emotional cues (Lehman 2018). This may well be a genre in which musical meaning is transmitted more directly than Taylor specifies, from savvy composers to savvy listeners. He does limit the scope of his book to "Western art music" (2), but it is hard to see how film music could be fully excluded from this category; and given its extraordinary reach, it ought not be ignored as a paradigm of meaning-making.

Less controversial is Taylor's third chapter, which deals with musical collaboration. This chapter is, in fact, rather beautiful—it elegantly categorizes four basic types of working arrangements between artists, based on whether *all* participants are able to generate ideas and evaluate ideas, or only *one* participant has final say over one or both imaginative processes (60). Setting out the parameters of the working relationship ahead of time, one could easily imagine saving artists a great deal of grief. (Taylor also provides instructive case studies on *failures* of communication.) The chapter is a sensitive treatment of artistic communication in general, and would be valuable study material for any college music curricula with a collaborative focus.

*The Imagination of Experience* would be a useful contribution to any library on music cognition, even had it limited itself to the second chapter's engaging, informative and well-supported description of the musical creative process. But Taylor goes further, pursuing its implications to occasionally provocative places. In any case, his treatments of imagination and collaboration are refreshingly clear, and the prose style approachable to both scholars and the lay audience. It is the latter whom Taylor wishes to empower: "Musical imagination must be a universal ability," he writes, and therefore "every [person] must then be capable of being an artist." We must simply re-learn the "freedom of spirit" we had as children (108).

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ROBERT LOPEZ-HANSHAW  
UnTwelve, USA

## Expressiveness in Music<sup>\*</sup>

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HAROLD OSBORNE

While all music lovers are convinced of the power of music to move them emotionally, our understanding of the expressive and emotional nature of music has been bogged down by a century of controversy which has had no other outcome than to forge more and more rigidly opposing standpoints on questions that have usually been too vaguely formulated for clarification to be possible. Controversy has turned on two main points: (1) Is the expression of emotion by means of music possible? Is it essential? Is it a major function of music or a main reason why music is so highly valued? (2) If music does express emotions, are these the emotions familiar to us in everyday life or are they a special set of emotions experienced only in listening to music?

The controversy about the expressiveness of music was set on foot in 1854 by Eduard Hanslick's little book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (On the Musically Beautiful), which electrified the musical world of his day by describing music as *tönend bewegte Formen* (sonorous form in movement) and asserting that it is intrinsically incapable of expression. This was followed in 1880 by Edmund Gurney's monumental work *The Power of Sound*, which took a similar line. In our own century, in exaggerated opposition to the mushy sentimentality which only too easily infects much writing about music in the Romantic tradition, Igor Stravinsky said in *Chronicles of My Life* (1936): 'I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. Music is given to us with the sole purpose of establishing an order in things . . . Its indispensable requirement is construction. Construction once completed, this order has been attained, and there is nothing more to be said.' In direct contrast with this line of thought is the much more prevalent conception of music today which is symbolised in the description of it as a 'language of the emotions.' It is the purpose of this paper to suggest a few considerations which may help to prepare the ground for a reconciliation of these views or at least take us a step beyond the bare confrontation of the irreconcilable.

In his influential book *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956), Leonard B. Meyer distinguishes between what he calls the 'formalist' and the 'expressionist' theories as follows: 'The formalist would contend that the meaning of music lies in the perception and understanding of the musical relationships set forth in the work of art and that the meaning of music is primarily intellectual, while the expressionist would argue that these same relationships are in some sense capable of exciting feelings and emotion of the listener.' This formulation perpetuates the common mistake of assuming that appreciation of any work of art must be either intellectual understanding or emotional response. On the contrary, artistic appreciation consists in *perceptual* apprehension. Appreciation of music is the auditory apprehension of a sonorous construct as an ordered, emergent unity. Preliminary intellectual analysis may help as a preparation towards non-analytical, synoptic apprehension. But appreciation itself is not the piecemeal awareness of constituent parts which are then related together by understanding, but the subsequent synoptic apprehension of the unitary whole. It is the resultant expansion and enlargement of perceptual consciousness which justifies our calling the experience aesthetic and its object a work of art. True, this perceptual experience may itself be profoundly



emotional. But the antithesis between emotional response and intellectual understanding remains a false one: appreciation must be regarded as emotionally coloured perception. The necessity for realising this is apparent in such a book as *The Sense of Music* (1959) by Victor Zuckerkandl, when he asks: 'And where in all this is there a place for emotion, which so many believe constitutes the very essence of music—so much so, in fact, that music is quite commonly referred to as the language of the emotions? There is just no place for emotion in the context of the essential question.' He then adds: 'There is no musical experience without emotion, that is to say, there is no way of grasping a musical context, the motion of tones, otherwise than by partaking in it, by inwardly moving with it — and such inward motion we experience as emotion.' Thus he returns to Hanslick's *tönend bewegte Formen* but seems to claim that the apprehension of these forms in auditory perception is an emotional experience.

Let us for a moment forget the formidable elaboration of theory and consider what it is actually like to listen to music. When I am listening to a piece of fine music I am not more than peripherally aware of myself as swept by successive emotions or wallowing in a warm bath of emotional indulgence. Attention is concentrated on perceiving the structure of sound that is being presented. Afterwards, when it is over, I may say that the experience was profoundly emotional or that, profound emotion was 'in' the music. During performance the experience was one of concentrated hearing. It is when we listen to melodies, however, or rhythms, or slighter pieces of music that we chiefly tend to hear the emotion 'in' the music.

When we experience music, or indeed any work of art, we attend not only to the physical properties it manifests, but also to its aesthetic or expressive features. These fall into three classes: (1) Aesthetic qualities proper, such as are indicated by the descriptions 'elegant,' 'graceful,' 'majestic,' 'dainty' (2) 'emotional or 'mood' qualities such as are indicated by describing a work as 'sad,' 'lugubrious,' 'gay,' 'serene,' etc. and (3) affective or evocative qualities such as 'moving,' 'charming,' 'exciting,' 'tedious,' etc. It is the second class which have created unsolved problems for aestheticians.

Phenomenologically, we hear the emotion of sadness, gaiety or whatever in the music as a feature of the sonorous construct which is the music presented to us. We do not necessarily experience it as an emotion in ourselves. For example, Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* is inappropriate at a wedding because it *sounds* joyful — we hear joyfulness in it — at a time when we are feeling sad. Nor do we mean that the emotion we hear 'in' the music is a sign of a similar emotion experienced by the composer or the performer, as we assume that a bodily gesture is a sign of sadness, surprise or delight. We assume that the 'sublime' emotions we hear in the last part of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* or Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* were experienced *at some time* by the composers, but this is an assumption difficult to verify. The emotion we hear is 'in' the music, a feature of the music itself in a way in which sadness, surprise or delight are not features of the gesture which indicates them. Emotions, however, are mental states or events in living creatures. Works of art are not living creatures and the problem posed for aesthetic theory is how emotional qualities can be perceived 'in' them. At least it is clear that the analogy we need is not that of the expressive gesture (Ouch!), but rather the expressive character which cloaks many natural objects — the dolefulness of a weeping willow, the calm tranquillity of an Essex countryside, the violent agitation of a storm at sea or the harsh melancholy of the foghorn.

We speak of 'emotion.' But emotion is a complex mental state consisting of an object or situation apprehended and a tendency to take action in relation to it as well as a linked feeling tone. It is the affective state alone which is expressible in pure music or non-representational art. What we hear in music are the shades of feeling, the minutiae of mood and affective tone, which we experience in life sometimes embodied in full-blown emotions but sometimes alone. When they occur alone we call them 'moods'. Music may express sadness or dejection but not sorrow or grief, which are states of feeling related to apprehended situations, unless there is an indication of referential context as in opera or song. Anger, sexual jealousy, irritation, despair cannot be expressed in 'pure' music or non-

representational art. No one has ever detected, or could ever detect, an emotion of despair in a piece of pure, non-relational music or non-representational visual art, for despair involves a feeling of very intense dejection specifically directed towards a situation apprehended together with a belief that no action is possible to better the situation. Unless there is non-musical reference accompanying the music, only the feeling tone or mood can be expressed. Busoni understood this when he wrote in *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* (1911): 'To music, indeed, it is given to set in vibration our human moods: Dread (*Leporello*), oppression of the soul, invigoration, lassitude (Beethoven's Late Quartets), decision (*Wotan*), hesitation, despondency, encouragement, harshness, tenderness, excitement, tranquillisation, the feeling of surprise or expectancy, and still others; likewise the inner echo of external occurrences which is bound up in these moods of the soul. But not the moving cause itself of these spiritual affections; — not the joy over an avoided danger, not the danger itself, or the kind of danger which caused the dread; an emotional state, yes, but not the psychic species of this emotion, such as envy, or jealousy; and it is equally futile to attempt the expression, through music, of moral characteristics (vanity, cleverness), or abstract ideas like truth or justice. When this is borne in mind part of the difficulty is reduced. We understand how the music of opera and song, religious music and incidental music, in general can be appropriate to the occasion, or not. We have the analogy of expressive sounds in nature which carry an aura of mood and affective tone. By the powers of synaesthesia, just as the painter Arthur Dove could represent the mournful sound of the foghorn by his painting *Fog Horns* and the Futurists Russolo and Boccioni expressed states of mind by their evocative abstractions, so music by its evocation of mood can express the affective aura of things and situations though not the things or situations themselves.

It is still necessary to circumscribe more precisely the logic of 'express' in this context. On the one hand the ancient Chinese and Indian aesthetic traditions have understood better than Western aesthetics of this century that self-revelation for its own sake is not an aesthetic aim. A composer may or may not treat his music as a sort of emotional autobiography in which to expose the moods and emotions he feels: we are interested in such self-display only to the extent that what is revealed in the music has been endowed with universal, more than passing individual value. The logical difference between self-expression and self-revelation has been interestingly worked out by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Works and Worlds of Art* (1980), pp. 21–29. It must be added that self-expression so distinguished must nevertheless be subject to further conditions before there can emerge an object appropriate for aesthetic contemplation. On the other hand it is generally agreed in contemporary aesthetics, following Kant (e.g., *Critique of Judgement*, Bk 1, sect. 13), that the arousal of specific emotions is not a proper function in any of the arts. Indeed many would maintain that a work of art which stimulates emotion directly in a hearer is not functioning aesthetically, as art. The aesthetic function of art, including of course music, is not emotional arousal but the *presentation* of feeling and mood. A poem about a spider need not — should not — evoke in the reader the emotions of horror and disgust experienced by a woman who seeing a spider leaps upon the nearest chair. When reading Andreyev's *The Seven Who Were Hanged* we do not set ourselves to planning ways of escape. The work of art presents emotional moods in such a way that in contact with the music the hearer non-verbally apprehends them, savours the way they feel and contemplates them as items in the human affective repertory. The extent to which in order to savour and apprehend the feeling tone of emotions in a work of art it is necessary to experience them vestigially in oneself seems to vary from person to person: in general, people experienced in aesthetic contact with the arts find this less necessary. But the central principle is clear: appreciation of music is not emotional response in the way in which the woman responds to the sight of a spider or the heroic lad in the audience leaps on to the stage to rescue the heroine from a fate worse than death. It is emotionally coloured perception demanding the utmost in perceptual concentration and the expansion of awareness to heights beyond the ordinary so that an extremely complex but unified object may be brought to consciousness as a unity in 'synoptic' perception and not put together analytically from discretely heard constituent elements.

While the foregoing exposition falls within the general ambit of contemporary Western aesthetics, it must nevertheless be recognised that even a cursory survey reveals that music is a pretty well universal phenomenon among the peoples of mankind and that throughout the world it has in fact been practised primarily for the evocation of emotion and mood. In primitive times the obsessive and hypnotic effects of musical sound in conjunction with incantatory chanting have been exploited by shamans and medicine-men from the peoples of northern Europe to Tibet, by tribal priests everywhere, to induce abnormal states of consciousness which were believed to involve direct contact with magical or supernatural powers. One thinks also of the Vedic chanting of ancient India. The deep sonority of the *rag-dungs* (copper tubes up to 15 feet long) descended from the ancient Bon religion of Tibet still exerts a powerful emotional 'response, as does the resonance of the 6 feet Chilean *trutruca* and other long wooden tube-like instruments played by the natives of South America. The profound emotional powers ascribed to music are reflected in the miraculous legends which attach to famous musicians of antiquity whose names have survived. The Greek poet-musician Orpheus, it was told, could move trees and rocks, hold wild beasts in check, by his music. Similar tales were told of Tansen, the court musician of the emperor Akbar, that he could light a candle or cause the sun to rise an hour early by his music. Throughout history music has everywhere been used in conjunction with ritual and ceremonial to evoke religious or patriotic warlike emotions and for milder emotional titillation in times of leisure.

The philosophers of ancient Greece were deeply convinced of the direct effects of music on human character and emotional disposition. Contrary to current Western belief, the emotional character and influence of the music was attributed not to the individual composition but to the mode in which it was played. This linking of emotional power of music with mode has been taken for granted in most developed musical traditions. It was strong in Europe up to the time of the Baroque. In the sophisticated tradition of Iran it is the mode or *dastgah* which determines the emotional atmosphere and creates the right state of mind in the listener, giving new reality to the magic of the word, inducing revelation into the mystery of meaning behind the words of the great poetic epics. The Indian musical tradition stands, of course, at the summit of this line of evolution. Emotional atmosphere is embodied in the *raga* and the *rasa* works directly upon the mind of the hearer. In his book *The Raga of Northern Indian Music* (1963) Alain Danielou writes: 'Indian music, like Arabian and Persian, always centres around one particular emotion which it develops, explains and cultivates, upon which it insists, and which it exalts until an impression is created on the listener which is almost impossible to resist. The musician can then, if his skill be sufficient, leads his audience through the magic of sound to a depth and intensity of feeling undreamt of in other systems.

From the time of jazz with its debts to African folk songs and African rhythms, much popular music in North America and Europe has made the direct arousal of emotion a deliberate aim, culminating in hysterical swooning and emotional ejaculation among audiences of fans. It became the music of the young. But the more serious exponents of pop music have made careful studies of the music of India and the Far East. What they were in search of was a music which could induce the sort of expansion of consciousness and extension of awareness which the younger generation sought in too superficial addiction to Yoga disciplines, Zen contemplation or psychedelic drugs. Since Indian classical music became more generally familiar in America and Europe during the 1950s through such figures as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and the brothers Imrat and Vilayat Khan it began to be believed that this was the goal of which they had been in search. It was even believed by the ignorant that this music could 'send one on a trip' without drugs. This is, of course, a distortion of fact. But the aim is far from sheer emotionalism. It is a form of 'magic consciousness' which the religious mystic of all ages seeks through the contemplation of God and describes as ineffable union with the divine. It has been described as a 'transparent' mode of perception free from the bounds of space and time, but one which is not always or necessarily religious in origin. The hallucinogenic drugs induce an analogous state without providing the perceptual material with which it can be

satisfied. The aim of the arts, I have elsewhere maintained, is, centrally, to create such an intensification of perceptual awareness, opening the doors of consciousness, while offering perceptual material of complex organic unities adequate and more to maintain such a state active and alert.

This conception, which may be extended to the other arts besides music, does justice to the emotional power of music while recognising the 'aesthetic distance' which Western philosophy rightly, if sometimes exaggeratedly, maintains is an essential condition of the aesthetic attitude of attention.

*Switzerland*  
*Founding Editor*  
*British Journal of Aesthetics*

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